

LÉVI-STRAUSS, ANTHROPOLOGY AND AESTHETICS

In a wide-ranging and original study of Claude Lévi-Strauss's aesthetic thought, Boris Wiseman demonstrates not only its centrality within his oeuvre but also the importance of Lévi-Strauss for contemporary aesthetic enquiry. Reconstructing the internal logic of Lévi-Strauss's thinking on aesthetics, and showing how anthropological and aesthetic ideas intertwine at the most elemental levels in the elaboration of his system of thought, Wiseman demonstrates that Lévi-Strauss's aesthetic theory forms an integral part of his approach to Amerindian masks, body decoration and mythology. He reveals the significance of Lévi-Strauss's anthropological analysis of an 'untamed' mode of thinking (*pensée sauvage*) at work in totemism, classification and mythmaking for his conception of art and aesthetic experience. In this way, structural anthropology is shown to lead to ethno-aesthetics. *Lévi-Strauss, Anthropology and Aesthetics* adopts a broad-ranging approach that combines the different perspectives of anthropology, philosophy, aesthetic theory and literary criticism into an unusual and imaginative whole.

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Lévi-Strauss, Anthropology and Aesthetics

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LÉVI-STRAUSS,
ANTHROPOLOGY
AND AESTHETICS

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*To my father and mother
In memory of John Taylor*

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Introduction: ethno-aesthetics

When Claude Lévi-Strauss was a child, his father, Raymond Lévi-Strauss, a portraitist and genre painter whose works were exhibited in the Salons de Paris in the early part of the twentieth century, gave his son a Japanese etching. The young boy used it to adorn the bottom of a box. Later, when he was old enough to be given pocket-money, he would spend it on miniature items of furniture bought from a Parisian shop called *The Pagoda*. Little by little, he assembled, in his box, a miniature Japanese house. Lévi-Strauss (2003) tells the story himself, age 77, adding that the etching is still in his possession – carefully preserved like the memory itself.

The significance of this biographeme is perhaps best viewed in the light of a passing comment made by Baudelaire in his essay ‘A Philosophy of Toys’, itself the recollection of a childhood memory but also a meditation on the role of the imagination in aesthetic perception. The essay, which in many ways anticipates future psychoanalytic insights into the importance of a child’s play, is about the way in which children create imaginary worlds by acting on and through their toys. All children, Baudelaire remarks, talk to their toys. Baudelaire, who was fascinated by toy shops – ‘Is not the whole of life to be found there in miniature – and far more highly coloured?’ (Baudelaire 2003c: 199) – presents the child’s relationship to his toys as a prototype of the adult’s relationship to the work of art. Having characterised different forms of child-play and different kinds of toys – the cheap, improvised toys of the poor are those that spark the imagination the best, says Baudelaire – he goes on to remark that if children act on their toys, the toys may also act on the children, in particular when it comes to literary or artistic predestination (2003c: 202). It would not be astonishing, Baudelaire continues, that a child brought up among puppet theatres, grows up to view theatre as the highest form of artistic expression (202).

Was Lévi-Strauss’s Japanese house a formative object of this kind? Did this paternal gift play a part in the shaping of the son’s own psyche? One is here in the realm of pure conjecture. However, a number of strands

of Lévi-Strauss's thought may indeed be traced back to this unusual toy, from which they seem to emerge. I am thinking, here, not only of personal preferences, such as his love of all things Japanese (1990; 1993b), or of specific aspects of his system of thought, such as his theory of the work of art as a '*modèle réduit*' (1962b), or his assimilation of creation to a form of *bricolage* (1990; 1993b), but of the general orientation of his thought, its openness to the exotic and the distant. There is, however, yet another sense in which Lévi-Strauss's father's gift shaped his destiny, which Lévi-Strauss himself explains in the interview mentioned above, one that takes on particular significance in the context of the argument of this book. As he explains, it was this gift that was at the origin of his fascination for rare objects. Since that day, he has maintained with them, as he puts it, 'the most intimate of relations' (2003: 7). It was this gift, in other words, that turned Lévi-Strauss into a collector.

As an adult, Lévi-Strauss went on to assemble two collections of ethnographic objects for the Musée de l'Homme, the first made up mainly of Caduveo and Bororo objects brought back from his 1936 expedition, the second of Nambikwara and Tupi-Kawahib objects, brought back from his 1938 expedition (Viatte 2003). He also assembled a large personal collection of ethnographic art that he was obliged to sell in 1951. A number of Katchina dolls were bought by Jacques Lacan; other items have found their way to the Louvre's Pavillon des Sessions and other museums. This collection was in part constituted in New York in the 1940s, where Lévi-Strauss had fled as a Jewish refugee. There, in the company of Max Ernst, André Breton and Georges Duthuit, Lévi-Strauss would wander the streets looking for antique dealers, whose stores and backrooms, he would later write, were like so many Ali Baba's caves (by his own admission, his contact with the Surrealists did much to shape his aesthetic sensibilities, which may in part explain his fascination with Amerindian mythology). Back in Paris after the war, he and Breton would still on occasion trawl the flea-markets.

It is perhaps this feature of Lévi-Strauss's psychology that best explains that, whatever the explicit subject matter of his many studies, there has been in nearly all his major works either a direct or an indirect confrontation with the question: what is the nature of the aesthetic object? In broad terms, this book constitutes an examination of the many different ways in which Lévi-Strauss has tried to answer this question. For, unlike many collectors, Lévi-Strauss sought to understand the nature of his 'intimate relation' to the objects that so fascinated him, such as the *xwéxwé* masks made by the Kwakiutl Indians, recognisable by their large protruding red tongues, bird-horns and cylindrical eyes. In this respect, my aim in this

book is to deal with a relatively ignored aspect of Lévi-Strauss's thought, which has been approached mainly from anthropological, sociological or philosophical perspectives. However, the drive of my argument is to show that aesthetics are an integral part of Lévi-Strauss's thought; that aesthetics and anthropology intertwine and do so at the most elementary levels of elaboration of Lévi-Strauss theories and interpretations. I have tried to show, in other words, the *mutual* imbrication of aesthetics and anthropology. Lévi-Strauss's anthropology shapes his aesthetics just as his aesthetics shapes his anthropology. I have therefore adopted, in this book, a deliberately interdisciplinary approach, one that tries to combine the perspectives of anthropology, philosophy, aesthetic theory and literary criticism. More narrowly specialised accounts of Lévi-Strauss's thought arguably fail to grasp its full significance. Addressing the question of the aesthetic in Lévi-Strauss's thought does not consign the reader to its margins. It enables one to tackle key issues about its articulation and development.

This book, however, is not only concerned with understanding Lévi-Strauss's thought on its own terms. It also tries to make a case for its relevance to contemporary aesthetic theory. In this connection, I have not so much set out to demonstrate that Lévi-Strauss was right or wrong on aesthetic or other issues, although I have formulated criticisms where I felt that they were required. Rather, I have tried to find ways of opening up Lévi-Strauss's texts to discover new meanings in them, meanings that sometimes contradict his explicitly stated positions. For example, despite Lévi-Strauss's well-known resistance to abstract art, I have tried to show, in chapter 4, that one may find in his theory of 'concrete logic' the elements of a theory of abstraction. This requires that one go beyond the letter of the text and explore its potentialities. In the process, I have tried to show that Lévi-Strauss's works are 'good to think with', as he says about the uses of plant and animal species by non-literate societies. In this book, Lévi-Strauss's thought is, thus, at once an object of study and a point of departure, a lens through which I have tried to view other objects and problems, in particular aesthetic ones. In the process, I hope to have demonstrated the continuing value of his writings.

The third and final line of argument pursued in this book emerged during the course of my analyses of the interdisciplinary connections outlined above. These raised a series of questions of a seemingly different nature (they are in fact connected), about the nature of the texts written by Lévi-Strauss and how one should read them. Although the most important part of Lévi-Strauss's works no doubt resides in the arguments and theories that he consciously and explicitly developed, as I became more and more

immersed in these arguments, it became increasingly apparent that they concealed another level of reading, that I have called, using Lévi-Strauss's own vocabulary, 'mytho-poetic'. The level of explicit discourse contains clues to deeper patterns, to which it cannot be reduced, but from which it is inseparable. Concepts and metaphors are, in Lévi-Strauss's thought, closely imbricated, just as anthropology and aesthetics are (perhaps the one explains the other). What underpins structural anthropology, beyond its conceptual content, is something more personal, a system of partially conscious ideas which are themselves deeply embedded in a series of recurring images. As we shall see, structuralism (the theory) is supported by a structural *imaginary*, whose 'logic' is essentially mytho-poetic (see, in particular, chapter I and the conclusion: 'Between concept and metaphor').

AESTHETICS AND THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF ART

My premise, in this book, is that one may find in Lévi-Strauss's works an aesthetics, in the philosophical sense of the term, and not simply an anthropological theory of art. Although this fact has far-reaching implications, it is one that has been seldom taken on board, except by a small number of commentators such as Claude Imbert (2000; 2004; 2005), Yvan Simonis (1980) and José Guilherme Merquior (1977), the author of the only other book-length treatment of Lévi-Strauss's aesthetic thought.¹ As Imbert rightly points out (2005: 62), it was not only out of friendship that Lévi-Strauss dedicated *The Savage Mind* to Merleau-Ponty, shortly after the latter's death. The whole of Lévi-Strauss's anthropological project is bound up with Merleau-Ponty's exploration of the enigma of our relationship to the perceptible world. Before there are linguistic structures, there are structures of perception.

The distinctive way in which Lévi-Strauss combines different kinds of theoretical discourses is brought to light when one compares his writings to those of another prominent anthropologist, this time writing in the Anglo-American tradition, Alfred Gell. For the latter, the anthropology of art and aesthetic theory are fundamentally and in principle incompatible. Gell's current appeal no doubt comes in part from his attempt to seek out a distinctively anthropological approach to art. Gell makes the point that anthropological theories of art should 'look like' other anthropological

¹ There are also sections on art and aesthetics in Marcel Hénaff's *Claude Lévi-Strauss and the Making of Structural Anthropology* (1998) and Jean Petitot's *Morphologie et esthétique* (2004). The *Magazine Littéraire* (1993) has devoted a special issue to 'Structuralism and Aesthetics'.

theories, such as kinship theory or exchange theory, and not like aesthetic theories or 'Western theories of art' (1998: 4). This is in part because he believes that anthropological theories of art should be about the pragmatics of how works of art are used to mediate social relations, and not about aesthetic 'responses'. The aim of anthropology, for him, is the study of social relations. The anthropology of art, he writes, should 'focus on social context of art production, circulation and reception' (1998: 3). For this reason, he objects to a common conception of the anthropology of art which presents it as an attempt to elucidate non-Western aesthetic systems, i.e. to determine the criteria used by non-Western societies for ascribing 'aesthetic' value – for example, why the Yoruba rate one carving as superior to another (1998: 3). For Gell, such an approach still smacks of Western art theory, which it simply transposes to 'exotic' objects, thereby partaking in an assimilation of non-Western art to the categories of Western art-appreciation. The function of such a theory is to make such objects available for consumption, as it were, by the West (1998: 3). In itself, this is not necessarily a bad thing, says Gell, but it is not anthropology.

Gell's objections to existing anthropological theories of art are grounded in legitimate concerns about the possibility of cross-cultural comparisons. Much ethnographic 'art' exists in the context of social institutions that are very different from those in which Western art exists – secret societies, for example, rather than museums or galleries. He cites the example of a decorated shield, similar to the Asmat shield reproduced in his book (1988: xxiv), which was designed to be used by warriors on the battlefield. Although a Western audience would undoubtedly recognise it as a work of art, is it appropriate, Gell asks, to talk about an indigenous 'aesthetic' response to the shield? As he puts it: 'Anthropologically, it is not a "beautiful" shield, but a fear-inducing shield' (1998: 6). There are many different kinds of responses to artefacts other than aesthetic, he points out. These may include, according to his own list: 'terror, desire, awe, fascination, etc' (6). It is these kinds of responses that Gell associates with the decorated shield, not aesthetic ones (I will return to this shield below). At his most sceptical, Gell is doubtful that all human societies, as he puts it, 'have an aesthetic' (6).

My point, here, is not about the relevance of Gell's theory for the ethnographic understanding of particular societies, and their social structures or patterns of behaviour. It is about how Gell positions his theory in relation to other disciplines and discourses and hence about the place of anthropological knowledge and understanding in a broader field. Gell's version of the anthropology of art is predicated on a series of gestures

of methodological exclusion. The basic model of these gestures of exclusion may be traced to his assertion that ‘Anthropology, from my point of view, is a social science discipline, not a humanity’ (1998: 3), although he does admit that the difference is an ‘elusive’ one. By contrast, Lévi-Strauss sees anthropology as one of the human sciences, and indeed as inseparable from a certain strand of humanistic thinking concerned with universals (1963a: 347–8; 1958: 378–9).² His conviction is that, as he puts it quoting Rousseau, by observing differences one may uncover similarities. Accordingly, Lévi-Strauss construes anthropology and aesthetics as inherently interrelated. In opposition to the specialisation of anthropological discourse advocated by Gell – questions arise, here, about the deeper motives behind his desire to evacuate the aesthetic from anthropology – Lévi-Strauss’s works provide an example of how anthropological enquiry, construed as a form of empirical philosophy, may open onto other discourses, such as aesthetic, without compromising its specific anthropological validity or indeed the validity of the discourses with which it connects.³

Trying to describe what an anthropological theory of art should ‘look like’, Gell, who has in common with Lévi-Strauss to have been deeply influenced by Mauss, makes the following remark: ‘Lévi-Strauss’s kinship theory is Mauss with “prestations” replaced by “women”; the proposed “anthropological theory of art” would be Mauss with “prestations” replaced by “art-objects”.’ Gell goes on to say that this does not, in fact, correspond to the theory that he is about to propose in *Art and Agency*, but is a guide to his ‘intentions’, namely to construct a recognisably *anthropological* theory of art. Mauss is invoked, here, because his theory of exchange is the ‘exemplary, prototypical “anthropological theory”’ (1998: 9). Interestingly, Gell’s theoretical model does fit, more or less word for word, Lévi-Strauss’s analysis of Northwest coast masks in *The Way of the Masks*, which discovers in the transformational processes that the masks undergo, as they circulate from

² For a discussion of Lévi-Strauss’s particular conception of humanism see Denis Kambouchner’s insightful ‘Lévi-Strauss and the Problem of Humanism’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Lévi-Strauss* (forthcoming). Kambouchner brings to light Lévi-Strauss’s virulent critique of a certain form of humanism and his attempt to find the theoretical premises of a new form of humanism. For Lévi-Strauss’s conception of the ‘stages’ of anthropological enquiry see 1963a: 354–6; 1958: 386–9. Anthropological understanding is presented as a succession of higher-order syntheses, which start with ethnography, which is based on field work and focuses on a particular social group, then moves on to ethnology, which introduces a comparative element, and finally anthropology, concerned with generalisations.

³ For an anthropological examination of the relative value of a structuralist (i.e. semiotic) approach to art and an agency theory based approach, see Layton 2005. In this book I will try to get beyond the characterisation of structuralism in terms of classical semiotic theory. See, in particular, chapter 3, ‘The Work of Art as a System of Signs’.

one population to the next, the key to the genesis of their distinctive styles. One may thus find in Lévi-Strauss's works a theory of the kind that Gell may indeed recognise as 'anthropological'. But one also finds something else in them. If one is to ask what the 'Overture' to *The Raw and the Cooked* most 'looks like' the answer may well be Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, Lessing's *Laocoon* or Benedetto Croce's *The Breviary of Aesthetics*. Lévi-Strauss integrates an aesthetics into anthropology (unless it is the other way round?), with all that this implies in terms of the reorientation of both. In other words, he addresses, through the anthropological data, questions about, for example, the ontological status of the work of art (these don't arise for Gell, who simply equates the work of art with the material object), the mechanisms of aesthetic creation, the nature of aesthetic emotion (aesthetic 'responses' in Gell's terminology), the relation between indigenous and Western art, the way different art forms signify and how they are interrelated. At the same time he also draws on aesthetic concepts to develop his anthropological theories. For example, Jakobson's ideas about the 'poetic function' lie behind his understanding of the structure of both myths and classificatory systems. In each of these cases one discovers the same 'projection of the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination' (Jakobson 1981: 27). What determines the sequence of a mythical narrative is an underlying homology ('equivalence') of the type: nature : culture :: raw : cooked. Lévi-Strauss's canonical formula formalises in algebraic terms Jakobson's poetic function. More fundamentally still (see chapters 2 and 3 of this book), what Lévi-Strauss calls *pensée sauvage* is essentially an updated anthropological version of what Alexander Baumgarten called 'sensuous cognition' (Baumgarten was the first philosopher to use the term aesthetic in a modern sense). The concept of 'sensuous cognition', in its various guises, has been central to aesthetic theory, from Kant to Hegel and Deleuze, and it is also in this aesthetic context that one should view Lévi-Strauss's anthropological exploration of 'primitive' modes of thought. It is no doubt in the *Mythologiques* that aesthetics and anthropology merge most seamlessly. Here, the decoding of the many 'mythemes' used by Amerindian populations to explain the world becomes one with the analysis of the relations between myth and music (cf. chapter 7, 'From myth to music'). It is Wagner, not Saussure, who is presented as the founding father of the structural analysis of myths. No doubt, for some, this may be seen to detract from the purely anthropological value of this work. But Lévi-Strauss has made a persuasive case for the inseparability of anthropological and aesthetic problems; problems which anthropologists such as Gell have tried to keep separate.

The distinctiveness of Lévi-Strauss's approach is illustrated by his brief discussion, in *Look Listen Read*, of the notion of rhythm used by Boas in his work on the decorative designs made by indigenous Alaskan populations. Boas, who was interested in the distribution of motifs and colours in textiles, saw spatial 'rhythms' as deriving from temporal rhythms, in particular those based on physiological motor phenomena. Lévi-Strauss, drawing on Benveniste, points out that the concept of rhythm was developed first by the pre-Socratics in a spatial sense, and was only subsequently applied to temporal phenomena, such as dance, by Plato. This reversal of the common understanding of the origin of the notion of rhythm provides Lévi-Strauss with the opportunity to reflect on its inseparability from the concept of totality (see the next chapter) and draw out its more general aesthetic relevance. A recurring pattern, he points out, is only perceptible within a closed rhythmic cell constituted of a limited number of elements (1997: 165; 1993a: 157). This leads to a general definition of rhythm – 'The idea of rhythm encompasses the series of permutations required to turn a collection into a system' (1997: 165; 1993a: 157) – which Lévi-Strauss goes on to apply to other kinds of objects, among them three Wagnerian motifs: 'Brünnhilde's sleep', 'the bird' and 'the maidens of the Rhine'. Each of these motifs seems distinct, but was in fact created by modulating the same five, recurring notes (one recognises, here, the combinatorial logic that is also characteristic of Lévi-Strauss's own way of thinking). The procedure recalls the decorative methods of the Alaskan populations studied by Boas. As Lévi-Strauss points out, the core aesthetic problem raised by the study of rhythm, be it in Alaskan needle-cases or Wagner's operas, is why the 'artist' chose one particular rhythm (permutation of elements) among all those possible. The value of Lévi-Strauss's approach, here, lies in the way in which he interconnects seemingly unconnected problems, linking up anthropological concerns with aesthetic ones, needle-cases and Wagner. One answer to the question of what determines the choice of one rhythmic pattern over another is the ease with which it may be recognised, which suggests a further link to the aesthetic/anthropological question of style (Egon Schiele's landscapes are as unmistakably his as his famous nudes).

I shall return below in more detail to the problems associated with formulating cross-cultural theories of art. But it is worth providing, here, a response to Gell's point that the designs on the Asmat shield were not apprehended 'aesthetically' by the Asmats or their enemies in the battlefield. Fra Angelico made paintings and frescoes whose purpose was primarily devotional, although he also belonged to the fifteenth-century

equivalent of an artistic 'avant-garde' (his new way of representing space was crucial for the development of Renaissance art). Many of them were destined for the walls of the monasteries of the Dominican order to which he belonged and were seen only by the friars who lived there, retired from the world. These kinds of images, and others like them, are viewed 'aesthetically' today, in art galleries or museums, by largely atheist audiences (the monks' cells that Fra Angelico decorated in Florence have today been turned into a museum). What these two very different kinds of viewers read into Fra Angelico's images diverges greatly. But the experiences of the Florentine friars who were Fra Angelico's contemporaries and the modern gallery-goer are not entirely incommensurable, nor indeed mutually exclusive. They only appear as such to those who hold a 'purist' conception of aesthetic experience. But this experience is, on the contrary, mixed, impure, made up of many kinds of sensory, emotional and ideational 'responses', capable of provoking, in Gell's words, 'terror, desire, awe, fascination' (1998: 6), all of which are integral to what we call 'beauty'. The fascination that Fra Angelico's world of delicate angels with multicoloured wings continues to hold suggests that what we call 'aesthetic emotion' is not altogether unrelated to a certain sense of the sacred or the supernatural. Just as religious experiences – as anyone who has attended a religious ceremony will know – may also be aesthetic experiences of sorts. Baudelaire famously contrasted an atemporal Beauty to a more ephemeral 'modern' beauty, in which he found the inspiration for many of his poems. He sought this beauty in the scenes of daily life unfolding around him in the streets of Paris. Cross-cultural comparison invites one to view 'aesthetic' experiences as part of an expanded field, a 'total' experience in the Maussian sense, which would enable one to see the compenetration of seemingly unrelated phenomena. Psychoanalysis proves a similar point. There are intriguing parallels between poetic language and the language of the psychotic (which is not to deny the pathological nature of psychosis). The disturbing yet aesthetically striking dream-image of a pack of wolves perched in the branches of a tree, taken from Freud's famous 'wolf-man' case, is a good example of the kind of compenetration evoked above. From an 'aesthetic' point of view, the Asmat shield can be *at once* a beautiful shield *and* a fear-inducing shield. As André Breton famously put it: 'Beauty will be CONVULSIVE or will not be at all' (Breton 1999: 160). The relativity of cultural values does not preclude a trans-cultural aesthetics; it simply dictates that it should be a decentred aesthetics. Finally, art objects acquire meaning and value through those who 'consume' them. In as much as these objects

are circulated and passed on in time, they acquire different meanings. Each of these meanings needs to be considered as integral to the overall meaning of the object and seen in relationships to one another. There is no 'original' meaning, except perhaps in a strictly chronological sense.

The considerations that precede explain why this book is closer in spirit to that of Simonis (1980) than to that of Merquior (1977). Merquior sets out to *extract* from Lévi-Strauss's works those pages that are devoted to art and aesthetics. In doing so, he dismembers Lévi-Strauss's works. Merquior's book is insightful, and usefully contextualises structuralist aesthetics, in particular in relation to phenomenology. However, it is framed in such a way as to leave much of what is interesting about Lévi-Strauss's writings in the dark: the betwixt and between. My argument is closer to that made by Simonis, who identifies what is undoubtedly a fundamental Lévi-Straussian turn of mind, a certain desire to cross in reverse the divide between nature and culture and apprehend the emergence of culture, as it were, from the point of view of nature. This is what Simonis terms Lévi-Strauss's 'passion for incest', a desire to return to a point prior to the formulation of the incest taboo, the first social rule. For Simonis, this project is paradoxical. It cannot be fulfilled 'metonymically' – i.e. by scientific discourse. The impossible passage from language (culture) to silence (nature) can only be achieved at the level of metaphor. In order for structuralism to be able to trace the route that leads from reciprocal exchange back to the 'silence of nature', it must therefore become, in Simonis's words, a 'logic of aesthetic perception' (1980: 307). Simonis seeks out the model of structuralism in Lévi-Strauss's theory of music, a cultural creation that attains meaningfulness by patterning our inner sense of time, thereby allowing us to 'perceive' (natural) rhythms – psychological, cardiac, respiratory, visceral – that would otherwise remain alien to conscious perception, and hence 'silent'. There is a silence at the core of language, which is culture's point of articulation to nature (1980: 306–7). The attempt to understand or think this point of articulation is an impossibility, since we cannot think outside of the symbolic order. But music, about which Lévi-Strauss says that its listeners are its silent executors, shows another way of understanding the passage from nature to culture, i.e. of understanding the 'silence' inherent in culture (nature's partition), one that is aesthetic (1980: 307).

What Simonis grasped so well was not only the connected nature of the aesthetic and anthropological dimensions of Lévi-Strauss's thought, but that the latter's attempts to grasp these connections were inseparable from a question that crosses over into critical theory: what kind of 'language' is

best suited to the carrying out of the programme of structural anthropology, 'metonymic' or 'metaphorical'? One limitation of Simonis's otherwise penetrating reading of Lévi-Strauss's works is that it functions within an epistemological framework in which the nature/culture divide is still credited with objective ontological validity. I will try to show (see chapter 6), by contrast, that Lévi-Strauss's works themselves provide the means of transcending this ontological presupposition and view art as one of the means of creating the nature/culture divide, which is itself an 'artefact', a structure invented by 'culture' or, as Philippe Descola (2004) has recently shown, by certain cultures.

One may sum up the arguments that precede by saying that this book makes the case for an ethno-aesthetics, i.e. a decentred aesthetics informed by anthropology.⁴ It tries to show, furthermore, that Lévi-Strauss's works provide a rich source of inspiration for such an aesthetic theory. In the rest of this introduction, I want to explore in more detail the nature of such a theory; my own particular vision of its distinctive modes of operation. I will try to formulate a model of cross-cultural comparison that allows for the constitution of an aesthetics that does not reduce the aesthetic systems of non-Western societies to Western categories. Here again one may turn to Lévi-Strauss's works for a model. As I will try to show, Lévi-Strauss enables one to view the epistemological specificity of ethno-aesthetics as a chiasmic switching of the poles of the 'near' and the 'far' in which it is not only the 'far' that becomes 'near' (the unfamiliar, familiar), but the 'near' that becomes 'far' (the familiar, unfamiliar). Let us try to illustrate this basic mechanism by exploring some parallels between ritual and theatre.

PERFORMING THE BODY

I would like to turn here, in some detail, to three early essays by Lévi-Strauss, 'The Sorcerer and His Magic' (1963a; 1958), 'The Effectiveness of Symbols' (1963a; 1958) and the *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss* (1987a; 1950a), and to the connections that they enable one to make between anthropology and aesthetics. Since these connections are not the object of explicit or systematic developments by Lévi-Strauss, it is the

⁴ I am using the term ethno-aesthetics, here, in a broader sense than it has had in anthropology since the seventies, where it essentially designates the study of local aesthetic systems and categories. My meaning is closer to that suggested for this term by Jacqueline Delange in *Arts et peuples de l'Afrique noire: introduction à l'analyse des créations plastiques*, first published in 1967 with a preface by Michel Leiris.

reader/analyst who must supply the missing links and piece together the aesthetic sub-text.

Today perhaps somewhat neglected, these multilayered essays stand out in Lévi-Strauss's corpus because of their concern with psychoanalytic theory. They testify to a period in the development of structuralism when Lévi-Strauss engaged directly and explicitly with psychoanalytic theory, and although this is principally in agonistic terms, it is nevertheless revealing that he should have chosen to situate his own endeavours in opposition to psychoanalytic principles and practices. 'The Effectiveness of Symbols' was dedicated to Raymond de Saussure (1894–1971), a psychoanalyst who met and corresponded with Freud and became the first President of the European Psychoanalytical Federation.⁵ These essays were to have a profound impact on Jacques Lacan, who refers to them in his seminal essays 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I' (2003a) and 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis' (2003b), also known as the 'Rome Discourse'. The structural theory of shamanism developed in the first two ('The Sorcerer and His Magic' and 'The Effectiveness of Symbols' were both originally published in 1949) played a key role in shaping Lacan's ideas about the infant's birth into language and the 'symbolic order', whose laws are embodied in the Name-of-the-Father.

Lévi-Strauss's essays, although they are not explicitly concerned with aesthetics, explore a question central to aesthetics – and indeed psychoanalysis, hence the references – that of the relationship between body and language. The first two essays deal with various kinds of shamanistic phenomena. 'The Sorcerer and His Magic' examines a case of death by bewitchment, the curious trial of an adolescent Zuni boy accused of being a sorcerer, and the fragment of an autobiography of a Kwakiutl shaman called Quesalid, collected by Franz Boas. 'The Effectiveness of Symbols' is the detailed analysis of the mechanisms of a shamanistic cure conducted among the Cuna Indians of Panama. Far from aesthetics, it would seem, the central concern of these essays is the source of the shaman's power, the efficacy of his cures and curses. The explanation of this power is to be found, in part, in what Lévi-Strauss calls the 'shamanistic complex' (1963a: 179; 1958: 197), an intricate social dynamic involving the shaman,

⁵ Lévi-Strauss met him through Jakobson in New York in the 1940s, where they became friends. He introduced Lévi-Strauss to a number of other refugee psychoanalysts, members of the first generation of Freud's disciples, among them Kris and Nunberg, who both worked with Freud (see Bertholet 2003: 167).

his or her victims or patients, and the social group as a whole (I will return to this below).

Let us look more closely at the Cuna cure. The Cuna shaman or *nele* is essentially a seer to whom the origins of illnesses are revealed and who negotiates with the world of the spirits to obtain the recovery of his patient. The particular case Lévi-Strauss relates is that of a difficult childbirth. The *nele* is called upon when the midwife is unable to induce the birth. The *nele*'s 'cure' consists entirely in the telling, or rather chanting, of a medicinal song (*ikarkana*) known as 'The Way of Birth'. There is no physical contact between the shaman and his patient, although the former does make use of various props, or magical objects. The myth sung by the shaman takes the form of a quest. The shaman must find the dwelling of Muu, who, according to Cuna beliefs, is both the divinity responsible for the formation of foetuses and the 'soul' (*purba*) of the uterus. In cases of difficult childbirth it is said that Muu has exceeded her role and has captured the *purba* of the other parts of the patient's body – heart, bones, teeth, hair, etc. – thus preventing the birth. Muu is not an inherently evil force; indeed she plays an essential part in the successful unfolding of the procreative cycle. However, it may happen, as in the present case, that she is led astray and becomes a source of trouble and disorder. The mythical narrative describes the shaman's combat with Muu and culminates when he finds Muu and her daughters and defeats them with magical hats. Once defeated, Muu frees the *purba* of the other organs and, resuming her normal role, collaborates in bringing about a successful birth.

What matter in the context of the present argument are the aesthetic lessons that one may draw from Lévi-Strauss's analysis of this cure. What are the connections, here, between anthropology and aesthetics? The shamanistic cure may be seen as proto-theatrical. It is not theatre in the modern sense of the term: the shaman does not act, in the way that a Western audience might understand acting; there is no real audience or even stage or theatre. Above all, the intention is not to create drama, in the modern sense of the term (i.e. an 'aesthetic' experience). Nevertheless, the cure, in which the shaman takes on a role and performs a myth within a certain ritual space, and, in part at least, for the benefit of the social group as a whole, offers a number of parallels with the theatrical experience that invite one to view it as a distant analogue to theatre. This comes out in particular if one is to consider the ritual use of language, which in many ways conforms to Artaud's ideal of a 'tangible, objective theatre language' that would 'abandon . . . our Western idea of speech' and 'turn words into incantations' (2005: 69–70). Artaud wanted to create a theatrical language,

different from ordinary language, which inflicted 'tangible laceration' (70) on the spectator or, one in which, as Lévi-Strauss writes in a very different context, 'symbols are more real than what they symbolise' (1987: 37; 1950a: 32). Lévi-Strauss's analysis of the Cuna cure provides a distant ethnographic model (mirror image) of this theatrical use of language and, by extension, a key to its 'symbolic efficacy'.

One of the vital clues to the shaman's 'therapeutic' method is provided by the original publishers of the *ikarkana* used by the shaman, Holmer and Wassen. The 'road to Muu' and 'Muu's dwelling' are meant to refer not only to mythical locations in the spirit world but also, respectively, to the pregnant woman's vagina and uterus. The references to mythical beings and their combats are the means of a phantasmagorical anatomy, a mapping out of an internal landscape. It is worth citing part of the medicine song. As the shaman approaches his patient he sings:

The (sick) woman lies in the hammock in front of you.
 Her white tissue lies in her lap, her white tissues move softly.
 The (sick) woman's body lies weak.
 When they light up (along) Muu's way, it runs over with exudations
 and like blood.
 Her exudations drip down below the hammock all like blood, all red.
 The inner white tissue extends to the bosom of the earth.
 Into the middle of the woman's white tissue a human being descends.
 ('The Way of Birth'. As cited Lévi-Strauss 1963a: 190; 1958: 209–10)

The shaman's use of language is allegorical in the sense that each signifier denotes more than one signified. The High Mountain and the Low Mountain are at once mythological sites and corporeal ones. The shaman's transposed anatomical sketch, however, is not a sketch of a real body. The sites it delineates do not correspond to the actual disposition of the patient's internal organs but rather to an 'emotional geography' (1963a: 195; 1958: 215), a fantasised body, and this is in part why the shaman's representations have such a powerful hold on his patient. One of the general aesthetic lessons of the cure is that symbols, paradoxically, acquire their 'efficacy', whether therapeutic or otherwise, precisely because they belong to the realm of the imaginary.

Although the central theme of the shaman's song is a mythological combat, the combat itself is dealt with very briefly. By contrast, preliminaries, such as the midwife's visit to the shaman, the preparation of the magical equipment of the *nuchu*, are all described in great detail. Certain seemingly anodyne actions, such as the midwife turning upon herself in the shaman's hut, or her entrance and exit from the hut, are equally reinforced

by means of repetition. These actions, Lévi-Strauss argues, are thinly disguised physiological processes. This is why the myth pays so much attention to the 'ascent' and 'descent' of mountains, the aim of the whole cure being to bring about the 'descent' of the unborn child. As Lévi-Strauss sums up: 'The technique of the narrative . . . aims at recreating a real experience in which the myth merely shifts the protagonists' (1963a: 194; 1958: 214). What is of particular aesthetic interest about this aspect of the analysis of the 'cure' is the mythological use of a veiled language to evoke the patient's subconscious experiences.

In the Cuna cure, the body-cum-mythical-landscape is the theatre of the events narrated by the shaman, which are fantastic but are also meant to parallel organic processes unfolding in the patient's body, of which she is unaware or only half-aware and upon which the cure sheds light. More, the shaman alternates between a transposed description of what the patient *is* feeling and what she *should be* feeling for the birth to occur. The true setting of the mythical narrative is, thus, the patient's body itself. This suggests, in return, a conception of the stage as a body-analogue, something that Beckett's theatre, with its urn-bound and half-buried characters, illustrates very well.

The function of the *nele*'s performance, and the more general aesthetic significance of his use of language, is thus brought to light. It consists in a symbolic manipulation of what one may call, borrowing an expression coined by psychoanalyst Françoise Dolto, the patient's unconscious body image. The medicine song is not primarily a means of representation but an instrument used to transform the body of the patient, our spectator/reader analogue. The shamanistic use of language corresponds, here, to Artaud's ideal of a theatrical language aimed at 'the whole anatomy' (2005: 66). In a very concrete sense, the Cuna cure exemplifies Artaud's proposition that, in theatre, 'metaphysics must be made to enter the mind through the body' (77). The myth is not a story, it is an instrument used by the shaman to mediate between himself and his patient, more specifically between himself and his patient's body.

However, for the bodily manipulation that is the aim of the Cuna cure to work requires more than the establishment of formal analogies between symbolic structures and physiological processes, the body-text parallels outlined above. It requires a relationship of identification between shaman and patient. This is essentially what Lévi-Strauss expresses when he writes that to understand the efficacy of the cure we need to understand under what conditions the shaman's mode of 'abreacting' induces his patient to abreact (1963a: 181; 1958: 199). Here, Lévi-Strauss explicitly compares the

shaman–patient relationship to the transference relationship established between analyst and analysand, or rather he presents the latter as an inversion of the former (1963a: 199; 1958: 220). It is not the place here to enter into a discussion of Lévi-Strauss's polemical characterisation of psychotherapy, which psychoanalysts might find difficult to recognise (it is worth recalling here that the essay was written in 1949). What matters from an aesthetic point of view is Lévi-Strauss's description of a ventriloquism that is as important to the successful shamanistic cure as it is to the dramatic experience. As he puts it: the shaman speaks *for* his patient. Said differently, the latter identifies with the former, which is what happens momentarily when, as a spectator, I confuse my experiences with those of the actors on stage. Their emotions become my emotions, their thoughts, my thoughts. This form of *possession* is at the heart of theatre as it is at the heart of the therapeutic power of the shaman. It is only through identification that the myth is *experienced* by the patient and takes the form of what Lévi-Strauss usefully calls a 'mythe vécu' or 'living myth' (1963a: 202; 1958: 223). The shaman *is* the protagonist of the myth that he tells and it is he who enters the patient's vagina, along with his phallic instruments and mythological helpers, in order to try and unblock the physiological process.

The ritual creates a space for a transposed encounter between the shaman and his patient, one that occurs at a level that transcends daily reality, that of the supernatural. Indeed, it is not the patient and the shaman who meet, but their mythological doubles. In the case of modern theatre, a similar encounter occurs but at the level of the imaginary. The spectator, like the actor, although in a less visibly physical way, projects himself/herself into a role, which is the means of a transposed encounter between actor and spectator (there are perhaps further parallels with transference here). And in both the case of the Cuna ritual and theatre, this is facilitated by a certain breaking down of the boundary between representation and reality, itself facilitated by the immediacy of live performance and the co-presence of its participants in the same space.

Lévi-Strauss's theory of shamanism anticipates, in a number of respects, some of the key features of Barthes's theories of textuality. The way in which the Cuna song indirectly represents a physical body anticipates Barthes's idea that style is a language within language that is specifically tied to, and signifies, the author's bodily experience of the world. Style, he writes, is 'a sub-language elaborated where flesh and external reality come together' (1968: 12–13). The Cuna cure demonstrates in its own way what Barthes later sought to establish in his literary criticism, namely that the body is a text, that it is constituted in and through language.

Michael Moriarty comments in his *Roland Barthes* that: 'the body returns . . . when Barthes begins to question the order of Western metaphysics and simultaneously the structuralism he sees as one of its avatars' (1991: 189). What precedes suggests that it is too simplistic to associate structuralism with the 'order of Western metaphysics' evoked above. In many ways, the theory of semiosis developed in these essays is quintessentially post-structuralist, if such labels have a meaning.⁶ It exemplifies a short-circuiting of logocentric thought in the process of communication: the ultimate referent, here, is the patient's body itself.

ARTISTS, SHAMANS AND PSYCHOPATHS

The value of Lévi-Strauss's studies of shamanism for the aesthetician lies in his ability to theorise complex phenomena in such a way as to bring out their relevance for an understanding of other kinds of phenomena. Lévi-Strauss's theoretical models constitute useful footbridges. Summing up his findings, Lévi-Strauss proposes to view the relationship between shaman and patient in terms of a relationship between 'normal' and 'pathological' thought, which he presents as 'an antagonism that is inherent in all thought' (1963a: 182; 1958: 201). Drawing on Saussurean categories that he bends to his own uses, he characterises this antagonism between 'normal' and 'pathological' thought in terms of two different states of equilibrium between signifier and signified:

From any non-scientific perspective . . . pathological and normal thought processes are complementary rather than opposed. In a universe which it strives to understand but whose dynamics it cannot fully control, normal thought continually seeks the meaning of things which refuse to reveal their significance. So-called pathological thought, on the other hand, overflows with emotional interpretations and overtones, in order to supplement an otherwise deficient reality. For normal thinking there exists something which cannot be empirically verified and is, therefore, 'claimable' ('il y a du non-vérifiable expérimentalement, c'est-à-dire de l'exigible'). For pathological thinking there exist experiences without object, or something 'available' ('des expériences sans objet, soit du disponible'). We might borrow from linguistics and say that so-called normal thought always suffers from a deficit of [signifieds], whereas so-called pathological thought (in at

⁶ The characterisation of the development of French thought in the second half of the twentieth century in terms of a progression from structuralism to post-structuralism, well established in literary studies, has had an obscuring effect. Moriarty's above comment captures very well one of the narratives that typically accompanies such a caricatural presentation of the development of French thought. One may legitimately ask to what extent a version of structuralism invented retrospectively by post-structuralists has become substituted for the real thing.

least some of its manifestations) disposes of a plethora of [signifiers].⁷ Through collective participation in shamanistic curing, a balance is established between these two complementary situations. (1963a: 180–1; 1958: 199–200)

One may recognise in this ‘arbitration’ a more fundamental feature of the aesthetic experience in general. In Lévi-Strauss’s model, the shaman is in the position of the ‘psychopath’ (once again, Lévi-Strauss is using the term not in a clinical sense, to designate a category of individuals, but to designate a position that we all, at times, occupy) and the patient in that of ‘normal’ thought. As can be seen with the Cuna ‘cure’, the shaman provides a language (signifiers) in which his patient is able to express the unexpressed, in particular her experience of pain. The shaman’s function is one of ‘containment’, in the psychoanalytic sense of the term. And, as Lévi-Strauss points out, the accuracy of his mythically transposed evocation of the patient’s physiological experiences is remarkable. The world of mythical beings he creates is the means of a veritable typology of pain. There is: ‘Uncle Alligator, who moves about with his bulging eyes, his striped and variegated body, crouching and wriggling his tail; Uncle Alligator Tiikwalele, with glistening body, who moves his glistening flippers, whose flippers conquer the place, push everything aside, drag everything; Nele Kikirpanalele, the Octopus, whose sticky tentacles are alternately opening and closing; and many others besides’ (1963a: 195; 1958: 215–16).

In a similar way that the Cuna shaman provides a language for his patient to express unformulated inner states, the artist invents forms that enable the ‘consumer’ to give expression to and integrate experiences that would otherwise remain unexpressed. In the case of theatre, as with ritual, this language is not simply linguistic, it is also to be found in the rhythms, non-linguistic sounds, actions and movements that are, like words, ‘containers’ of ideas. In *The Empty Space*, the theatre director Peter Brook gives a good example of this. In John Arden’s *Sergeant Musgrave’s Dance*, Sergeant Musgrave tries to express the futility of war. Finding his props (machine-guns, flags and a uniformed skeleton) insufficient he turns to something different. As Brook explains: ‘in a flash of inspiration he begins a rhythmic stamp, out of which develops a savage dance and chant. Sergeant Musgrave’s dance is a demonstration of how a violent need to project meaning can suddenly call into existence a wild unpredictable form’

⁷ I have amended the translation. In the translation by Jacobson and Schoepf, the French ‘signifié’ and ‘signifiant’ are rendered by the same word ‘meaning’, which makes a nonsense of Lévi-Strauss’s argument.

(Brook 1990: 79). One may see the shaman's mythical-beings, and the aesthetic sign in general, as 'forms' of this kind.

This function of 'containment' may also be seen as one of the purposes of narrative closure. One of the principal requirements is that the shaman tells a story that has a *dénouement*, in which all the protagonists have found their right place (1963a: 196; 1958: 217), as is the case in Greek tragedy and many other kinds of story-telling. In this respect, the semiotic universe (economy) of the ritual cure has an affinity with the semiotic universe of the thriller. Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) provides a good example. In it, Jeffries, a wheelchair-bound photographer (played by James Stewart) spies on his neighbours from his apartment window (a metaphor for the cinema screen). He gradually becomes convinced that one of them has killed his invalid wife. Initially, Jeffries is in a position equivalent to that of 'normal' thought, characterised by its 'deficit of signifieds' (the shaman's patient exemplifies an extreme form of this semiotic disequilibrium). The actions he observes through his window form meaningful sequences but he does not know *what* they mean. They constitute signifiers without signifieds. Here too, there is a semiotic 'demand', that in the audience is a source of anxiety or dramatic tension. In response to this situation, Jeffries starts to speculate about what these actions might mean. He gradually takes on the role of the shaman, supplying the 'plethora' of signifiers and matching them up with signifieds, thus making sense of what he observes. Like the shaman, his intellectual need – matching that of the audience – is to integrate elements into a system (1963a: 196; 1958: 217). Here, the means by which Jeffries does so is the hypothesis of the murder.

In the ethnographic example cited above of the trial of a boy accused of being a sorcerer, the boy begins by denying the charges laid out against him. When he realises that his defence is not working, he adopts another strategy, that of corroborating the accusations. He invents, for example, a magical feather that he claims to have used to bewitch his victim. Lévi-Strauss explains the surprising success of this defence as follows. What the group wants from the boy – in fact demands of him – is that he confirms the reality of the indigenous system of beliefs that explains the disturbing event at the origin of the accusation, the inexplicable fit of a little girl. The boy is placed by the group in a position analogous to that of Jeffries in Hitchcock's film. His role is to integrate this disrupting event into a coherent and believable narrative. In doing so, he becomes the guarantor of the veracity of the system of belief that founds the group's conception of illness, i.e. the magical ideas that explain it. This not only enables them to integrate the disturbing experience of the girl's fit into an explanatory

system, but confirms the reality of the cultural schemas on which the social group depends to make sense of their lives. As Lévi-Strauss puts it: 'through the defendant, witchcraft and the ideas associated with it cease to exist as a diffuse complex of poorly formulated sentiments and representations and become embodied in real experience' (1963a: 173–4; 1958: 191). In this connection, the pleasure provided by the detective genre appears as the outcome not only of the solving of the mystery, but of the presentation of a version of the world, one in which murders are solved, the good rewarded and the bad punished. The detective story supports (or, in its atypical realisations, subverts) an ideology. One might also have said about the boy accused of being a sorcerer that his role is to make possible a sociological version of suspension of disbelief. As happens in the filmic or theatrical experience, the signifiers he provides enable the collective objectification of a series of subjective states of mind.

The early Lévi-Strauss essays that I have explored in the pages that precede constitute elaborations of Mauss's theories about the projection of the social on the corporeal and it is as such that they have special aesthetic value. I have not yet brought into the picture the third of the essays mentioned above, the *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, published the year after the two essays on shamanism (1950). Doing so will allow me to make the last in the series of ethno-aesthetic connections that I would like to consider here. This essay brings into sharper focus the core of Lévi-Strauss's ideas about the relationship between individual and group, which is integral to his understanding of how symbol and body are interconnected. One of the lessons of the *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss* is that the subjective experiences of individuals are constituted in and through a symbolic order that pre-exists and transcends them. No member of society can integrally escape this predicament were it simply by virtue of the fact that he or she is the speaker of a language whose lexicon and grammatical structures shape his or her subjectivity. The socially constructed nature of subjectivity explains in part the efficacy of the shamanistic manipulation of symbols and other related phenomena, including art. The symbolic productions of individual members of society necessarily form part of broader systems, from which they derive their meaning. As Lévi-Strauss puts it, summing up his conception of the relationship between individual and group: 'modes of individual behaviour are . . . *never symbolic in themselves*: they are the elements out of which a symbolic system, which can only be collective, builds itself' (1987a: 12; 1950a: 16). The group functions like a life-support system which, when withdrawn, as in cases of bewitchment, can literally bring about death. Conversely, the

manipulation of symbols can also have a therapeutic effect whose aesthetic analogue is what we commonly call 'catharsis'. In other words, shamanism revealed to Lévi-Strauss a complementarity between the psychic and the somatic that is written into the very structure of the individual's relationship to the group.

There is, however, another ethno-aesthetic lesson contained in the *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*. What the above theory of the relationship between individual and group does not explain is why the symbolic productions or manipulations of certain individuals, such as shamans and artists, seem to have a special power that is not conferred on the symbolic productions of the rest of the group. The study of shamanistic phenomena complicates the above picture in which individuals are presented as immersed in a symbolic and *reveals the existence of two different but complementary relationships to the symbolic order*, two 'positions' that individuals may take up or indeed be assigned. If the vast majority of individuals contribute to the construction of a collectively owned symbolic order in the manner outlined above, a much smaller group take on a different role. How is this?

As is well known, Lévi-Strauss construes any culture as 'a combination of symbolic systems headed by language, the matrimonial rules, the economic relations, art, science and religion' (1987a: 16; 1950a: 19). The relationship between these symbolic systems and social reality itself is that of *langue* to *parole* (said differently: the symbolic systems in which cultures originate are unconscious). However, not only is the symbolic order realised by any given society always unfinished (1987a: 22; 1950a: 23), it never coincides exactly with its 'ideal', i.e. unconscious, template ('langue'). History, in particular, introduces extrinsic elements into the underlying system. These elements distort or modify a society's underlying symbolic structures (1987a: 17–19; 1950a: 20–1). This is what happens, for example, when the social institutions invented by one society are shaped by those invented by a neighbouring society. Furthermore, the different kinds of symbolic systems constitutive of a given society, which are incommensurable, transform at different paces (1987a: 17–19; 1950a: 20–1). It is here that the shaman – and the artist – have a role to play. As Lévi-Strauss explains: 'Instead of saying that a society is never completely symbolic, it would be more accurate to say that it can never manage to give all its members, to the same degree, the means whereby they could give their services fully to the building of a symbolic structure which is only realisable (in the context of normal thinking) in the dimension of social life' (1987a: 17–18; 1950a: 20). Human societies therefore exclude certain individuals from the symbolic

order or rather assign to them a special place. These individuals are placed not exactly outside the symbolic order, which is an impossibility, but on its periphery. This is the space occupied by the shaman, the artist and the 'psychopath', inventors of idiolects (or what they present as such) that exist alongside the collectively constructed symbolic order and are used to mediate between the symbolic order and that which escapes or exceeds this order, threatening its integrity and stability. In Lévi-Strauss's own words:

Any society at all is . . . comparable to a universe in which only discrete masses are highly structured. So, in any society, it would be inevitable that a percentage (itself variable) of individuals find themselves placed 'off system', so to speak, or between two or more irreducible systems. The group seeks and even requires of those individuals that they figuratively represent certain forms of compromise which are not realisable on the collective plane; that they simulate imaginary transitions, embody incompatible syntheses. (1987a: 18; 1950a: 20)

Lévi-Strauss's theory of shamanism leads to a sociological theory of the artist as outsider. The artist, like the shaman and the psychopath, is, in this respect, a scapegoat of sorts. Although relegated to the fringes of the symbolic order, his/her role is to guarantee that the total system does not disintegrate into its constitutive elements. His/her exclusion is necessary for the maintenance of social equilibrium. Lévi-Strauss even goes so far as to argue that 'pathological' behaviour is only pathological in those societies, such as Western societies, where atypical modes of behaviour or symbolic production are not allowed to find expression in a specific vocation: 'For the very reason that shamanistic behaviour is normal, certain modes of behaviour can remain normal in shamanistic societies which, elsewhere, would be considered (and would in fact be) pathological' (1987a: 20; 1950a: 21). In other words, it is clinics that create psychopaths. Shamanism (and by analogy art), on the contrary, provides a social structure in which 'pathological' thought may find expression without becoming 'pathological'. Mauss notes in his essay on magic that sorcerers are chosen from certain social groups – 'the disabled; the ecstatic; nervous types and outsiders' – and adds: 'What gives them magical properties is not so much their individual physical character as the society's attitude towards people of their kind' (1987a: 14 ; 1950a: 17–18). Lévi-Strauss's theory of shamanism, and of what he calls 'symbolic efficacy',⁸ provides, as I have just shown, an explanation of just how this social empowerment works. The connections made here suggest that the power of the artist and that of

⁸ A valuable commentary of Lévi-Strauss's notion of the 'symbolic function' may be found in Merquior 1977: 18–27.

the shaman have a common source. Like the shaman, the artist may be viewed as an invention of the group. He or she is born from a sacrificial act, carried out by the group, in order to preserve its own sanity.

The above developments enable one to interpret an important but enigmatic remark made in the *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss* (it constitutes one of the corner stones of structuralist aesthetics). The remark occurs in the context of Lévi-Strauss's discussion of the anthropological notion of *mana*, an Austronesian term once thought to denote an invisible sacred power, sometimes likened to electricity. Drawing on structural linguistics, Lévi-Strauss reinterprets this notion as an 'empty signifier' equivalent to Jakobson's 'zero phoneme', a 'pure symbol' (1987a: 61; 1950a: 48) awaiting to be assigned a positive semantic value ('thing', 'thingummyjig' or 'doo-dah' are English equivalents). It is then that he goes on to make the following remark: 'I believe that notions of the *mana* type, however diverse they may be, and viewed in terms of their most general function ... represent nothing more or less than that *floating signifier* which is the disability of all finite thought (but also the surety of all art, all poetry, every mythic and aesthetic invention)' (1987a: 63; 1950a: 49). In other words, our ability to be creative is a function of a salutary mismatch between signifiers and signifieds, of the invention of forms that can only exist in excess of the collectively constructed symbolic order, which society is at a loss to know how to use and whose role it is for certain specially designated individuals to channel and convert into something else. This domain, Lévi-Strauss's anthropological enquiries teach us, is the domain of action of psychopaths, shamans and artists.

WHAT IS ETHNO-AESTHETICS?

My aim in the above discussion was to illustrate some of the ways in which anthropology and aesthetics may be interconnected. In particular, I tried to bring to light how, over great distances, the functioning of a shamanistic cure may come to parallel that of a theatrical performance. My point is not to reduce one experience to the other, but to enlarge the context in which we view each, and reintegrate the 'aesthetic' phenomenon that is a theatrical performance into a broader network of interconnected experiences, sometimes seemingly far from aesthetics. By the same token, one may view the shamanistic cure as a form of 'lived theatre', to borrow a phrase coined by Michel Leiris to describe Ethiopian ceremonies of Zar possession. The result is what one may think of as 'ethno-aesthetics'.

In an aside contained in *The Savage Mind* Lévi-Strauss speculates about the nature of his interest in 'exotic' cultures. His answer is this:

the fascination exercised over us by customs apparently far removed from ours, the contradictory feeling of proximity and strangeness with which they affect us, stem perhaps from the fact that these customs are very much closer to our own than they appear and present us with an enigmatic image which needs deciphering. (1966b: 209; 1962b: 251)

Ethno-aesthetics may be thought of as arising out of the same contradictory sense of familiarity and strangeness and as also consisting in the 'decrypting' of enigmatic mirror images.

Nothing obliges anthropologists to tackle aesthetic questions in the course of their studies. On the contrary, as we have already seen, doing so is inherently problematic. Aesthetics, as we shall see in chapter 2, is the product of a particular culture and history, whose specific modes of thinking it reflects. Kant, whose *Critique of Judgement* is commonly presented as one of the founding works of aesthetic theory, analysed our relationship to beautiful objects in terms of what he called 'judgements of taste', judgements which have the form 'X is beautiful.' His whole conception of the structure of such judgements emerges out of the history of logic since classical Greek philosophy, and cannot be unproblematically transposed onto cultures that are not part of that history. But that does not mean that these cultures cannot be included in a transformed and expanded aesthetic field. And indeed, in many ways, contemporary aesthetic thought has moved away from Kantian categories (contemporary art questions the homogeneity and independence of aesthetic, moral and cognitive judgements, postulated by Kant).

Far from the universalising tendencies of one strand of Western aesthetic thought, Lévi-Strauss enables us to view the epistemological specificity of ethno-aesthetics as a chiasmic switching of the poles of the 'near' and the 'far', which, as I have argued elsewhere, is characteristic of anthropological understanding in general.⁹ In the course of the ethnographic journey it is not only the 'far' that becomes 'near' (the unfamiliar, familiar), but the 'near' that becomes 'far' (the familiar, unfamiliar). Distance, here, is an instrument of understanding: the anthropologist's distance not only relative to the 'exotic' cultures that he/she studies but also relative to his/her

⁹ For a detailed study of the place of chiasmus in Lévi-Strauss's works and a characterisation of anthropology in the light of this trope see Wiseman (forthcoming). For a more general exploration of chiasmic phenomena see my co-edited volume *Chiasmus in the Drama of Life*, also to be published in the Studies in Rhetoric and Culture series.

own culture (the latter is a by-product of the ethnographic journey). This distancing of the familiar casts a new light on it. The familiar object (a theatre performance) is transformed when apprehended through the lens of the unfamiliar object (a shamanistic cure). This is no doubt in part why anthropologists Ivo Strecker and Stephen Tyler have adopted chiasmus as the guiding trope of their Rhetoric Culture project and why they write about the latter's heuristic approach:

The interaction and interpenetration . . . has no dialectical consequence in which object and instrument are overcome or subsumed under some more inclusive neutralization or transcendence of their supposed opposition. There is instead a kind of alternation between object and instrument that may produce change but no necessary development . . . This underlying chiasmic reciprocity enables different moments in the interaction of culture and rhetoric.¹⁰

The title of Lévi-Strauss's third collection of essays, *The View from Afar* (1987b; 1983), comes from Zeami, the creator of Japanese Noh theatre. Zeami says that a good actor must be able to see himself in the way that his spectators see him – through their distant eyes.

Said differently, anthropological understanding is characterised by a twin process of dissolution and reconstitution of knowledge born from a dynamic of cross-cultural comparison. Anthropologist François Laplantine, drawing in part on Derridian ideas, describes this very well: 'The anthropological approach requires a veritable epistemological revolution, which starts with a revolution of the way in which we see. It implies a radical decentring, a shattering of the idea that there is a "centre of the world", and, consequently, a broadening and mutation of knowledge' (Laplantine 1987: 22, my translation). He later adds: 'Anthropology requires not only a shattering of knowledge . . . linked to the questioning of the culture to which one belongs, but also a *reassembling* and a *reconstitution* of that knowledge' (204).¹¹

¹⁰ Strecker and Tyler (forthcoming).

¹¹ In 'Structure, sign and play in the discourse of the human sciences', in large part a discussion of Lévi-Strauss's thought, Derrida writes: 'one can assume that ethnology could have been born as a science only at the moment when a decentering had come about: at the moment when European culture – and, in consequence, the history of metaphysics and of its concepts – had been *dislocated*, driven from its locus, and forced to stop considering itself as the culture of reference . . . One can say . . . that there is nothing fortuitous about the fact that the critic of ethnocentrism – the very condition for ethnology – should be systematically and historically contemporaneous with the destruction of the history of metaphysics. Both belong to one and the same era' (Derrida 2005: 356). Lévi-Strauss's integration of aesthetics and anthropology is part of a broader reorganisation of the human sciences, and the relationships between the constitutive disciplines. This was also captured very well by Foucault who, in this respect, compares anthropology and psychoanalysis: 'psychoanalysis and

The Wintu (an indigenous Californian population) have a verb system in which there are five moods which are used to differentiate between knowledge acquired by sight, by bodily impression, by inference, by reasoning and by hearsay. Together, these moods form the category of 'knowledge', which the Wintu distinguish from 'conjecture', which is expressed using other grammatical forms. Relations with the supernatural, Lévi-Strauss points out, are discussed using the moods reserved for the category of 'knowledge', and among them, specifically, those for knowledge acquired through bodily sensation, inference and reasoning. The way in which the Wintu experience the world, Lévi-Strauss suggests, is in a fundamental way shaped by these grammatical categories. As he writes: 'The native who becomes a shaman after a spiritual crisis conceives of his state grammatically, as a consequence to be inferred from the fact – formulated as real experience – that he has received divine guidance. From the latter he concludes deductively that he must have been on a journey to the beyond' (1963a: 179–80; 1958: 198). If one is to make, momentarily, the effort of transposition that anthropological understanding requires, what may one imagine 'aesthetic experience' to be, seen in Wintu terms? What verb forms might one use to express such experiences as looking at paintings or listening to music? To what category of knowledge might such experiences belong? Would the objects looked at, or the music listened to in this way, still be the same? My point here is not about the Wintu, but about what anthropological understanding can teach us, by analogy, about the construction – grammatical or otherwise – of our own aesthetic experiences.

What an anthropological approach to aesthetics does 'dissolve' is an essentialist conception of 'beauty'. In Plato's *Symposium*, Diotima describes to Socrates the long path of philosophical understanding and its various stages. In his youth, she explains, the apprentice philosopher seeks out beautiful bodies and is in love with one body only. When he realises that the beauty that resides in this body is the 'sister' of that which exists in others, his love extends to all beautiful bodies. As his education progresses he gradually comes to recognise that the beauty of the soul is greater than that of the body, and that there is beauty, also, in actions, laws and science. In this way, the philosopher elevates himself, by degrees,

ethnology are not so much two human sciences among others, but . . . they span the entire domain of those sciences . . . they animate its whole surface, spread their concepts throughout it, and are able to propound their methods of decipherment and their interpretations everywhere. No human science can be sure that it is out of their debt, or entirely independent of what they may have discovered, or certain of not being beholden to them in one way or another' (1997: 379).

abstracting himself from the world, until he is able to perceive a beauty that cannot be found in any human face or discourse or in any creature living on earth or in the sky. At the end of his journey what the philosopher is thus able to contemplate is 'beauty in itself'.

Lévi-Strauss's aesthetics and ethno-aesthetics are at the antipodes of such a conception. The kind of 'beauty' with which ethno-aesthetics is concerned is not transcendental but immanent; to be found in the flow of life, and changing and multiple like it. The objects of Lévi-Strauss's theoretical speculations are concrete and rooted in experience: a mask, a series of body paintings, myths, a lace ruff, a painting by Poussin. This is why Lévi-Strauss never proposes an *a priori* definition of beauty 'in itself'. Theory emerges out of the practice of cross-cultural comparison, a practice that sets the programme for ethno-aesthetics. The route he follows lies in the opposite direction to the one described by Diotima. Rather than leading away from the object towards a transcendental realm, it constitutes an attempt to rejoin the object.

Lévi-Strauss is an infatuated aesthete. And the amorous encounter comes first. Later, sometimes much later, the encounter gives rise to theorisation. The underlying aim of these theories, however, is to try to grasp – knowing the endeavour can never be entirely successful – the irreducible mystery of an original experience. The latter remains present as a vanishing point in the subsequent theoretical elaborations. Hence the disillusioned comments that conclude the Overture to the *Mythologiques*, in which Lévi-Strauss is obliged to recognise that by decoding the 'secret meaning' of Amerindian myths he has inevitably dispelled part of the 'power' and 'majesty' that they possessed when he first encountered them, 'hidden away in the depths of a forest of images and signs' (1970: 32; 1964a: 40), a state in which they maintained their beauty intact, but in which they could not be understood.

Lévi-Strauss was among those who first started to recognise that the art of non-literate societies, and in particular Amerindian art, was in no ways inferior to the art of so-called 'developed' societies (the situation of African and Oceanic art was somewhat different owing to its assimilation into European avant-garde art). This conviction, which he shared with, amongst others, the Surrealists, informs all that he has written about 'primitive' art. As he prophetically wrote in 1943:

The time is not far distant when the collections of the Northwest Coast will move from anthropological museums to take their place in art museums among the arts of Egypt, Persia and the Middle-Ages. For this art is not unequal to those great ones and unlike them, it has displayed, during the century and a half of its

development, a prodigious diversity and apparently inexhaustible power of renewal . . . This incessant renovation, this sureness which in no matter what direction guarantees definite and overwhelming success . . . this ceaseless driving towards new feats which infallibly ends in dazzling results – to know this our civilisation had to await the exceptional destiny of a Picasso. (1943: 175)

It was in 1960, at more or less the same time that Lévi-Strauss was writing *The Savage Mind*, that André Malraux decided to convert the Musée Permanent des Colonies, built in Paris for the 1931 Exposition Coloniale, into a Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, which he divested of its earlier ethnographic function that Malraux saw as the prerogative of the Musée de l'Homme (Daubert 2001). This was the sign of a deep cultural shift that is still ongoing. The most recent episodes in its story were the opening, at the Louvre, of the Pavillon des Sessions (to date, it has had more than 3.5 million visitors), and in June 2006 of an autonomous museum of non-Western art, the Musée du Quai Branly (it was going to be called 'Musée des Arts Premiers').¹² Lévi-Strauss's writings on art have doubtless played their part in this 'pantheonisation' of 'primitive' art, as one initiator of the Quai Branly project puts it (Martin 2003: 42). Perhaps better than any other anthropologist, he demonstrated that the many different kinds of art forms practised by non-literate societies are not 'marginal' art forms; they are not less integrally 'art'. Lévi-Strauss's view, in this respect, may be conveniently summed up in opposition to that expressed by the author of the entry on Polynesian art in *The Oxford Companion to Art*. Indigenous Polynesian populations make facial designs, carved ceremonial clubs, decorated jade pendants, cloth-work and many other kinds of artefacts, about which he writes: 'objectively considered [they] are the products of craftsmen rather than imaginative artists'. The lesson of structural anthropology – the condition sine qua non of ethno-aesthetics – is that the 'craftsman' is no less of an 'imaginative artist'. This proposition is worth a closer examination.

Western responses to the art of non-literate societies, in particular in the first half of the twentieth century, were marked by a residual evolutionism which presented human societies as developing from simpler to more complex forms, passing through a series of fixed stages (evolutionism was taken seriously by scientists and thinkers until the First World War). Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939), for example, characterised so-called 'primitive mentality' as 'pre-logical' and 'pre-scientific'. Within such a perspective, non-Western societies tended to be described mainly in terms of what they

¹² Lévi-Strauss was instrumental in securing governmental approval for this project (Martin 2003: 42).

lacked, usually the attributes that the allegedly more 'evolved' societies believed set them apart from the rest of humanity. This evolutionist paradigm is still at work today in the common characterisation of the art of non-literate societies as a less accomplished version of Western art. The implicit argument is that 'primitive' art has the appearance that it does because the 'primitive' artist lacks the knowledge, skills, materials or indeed, in the example cited above, 'imagination' to produce a more 'developed' art. In this case, the top of the evolutionary ladder is represented by Western illusionist art. Here, 'primitive' art is construed as something like a failed attempt at producing Western art. A corollary of this conception is that 'primitive' art is sometimes thought of as less 'free' – as if it were an art determined, from the outside, by its conditions of production.

It was this view of art that Lévi-Strauss sought to oppose when he wrote the following:

Art can be considered as 'primitive' in one of two senses. First, in the sense that the artist does not have sufficient grasp of the technical means or know-how necessary to realize his or her objective (that is, the imitation of a model), and as such can only signify it; an example would be what we call 'naive' art. In the second sense, the model the artist would depict, being supernatural, necessarily escapes any naturalistic means of representation: again the artist can only signify, but as a result of the object's excess, and not the subject's shortcomings. The art of preliterate peoples, in all its different forms, illustrates the latter case. (1997: 162; 1993a: 154)

The essence of Lévi-Strauss's argument and the key point for ethno-aesthetics is that 'primitive' art is as much the outcome of a positive aesthetic as any other form of art. It too emerges from its own particular set of cultural, religious, philosophical and aesthetic concerns. Western and non-Western art differ, not because one is 'free' ('imaginative'), the other not, but because each exercises its freedom in a different way or in a different domain. No creative act is integrally free. It is exercised within limits and constraints that vary in time and place. The artist is like the passenger on a ship who is free to roam wherever he or she likes, but is bound by the ship's length and breadth. And the smallest of decks is enough to make the artist feel free. The invention of geometric perspective in fifteenth-century Italy did indeed open up new possibilities for artists, but it does not follow that the images made by these artists were more imaginative or artistically 'superior' to those made by artists who had no knowledge of the mathematical laws of perspective. Each exercised the sum total of their skills and imagination within the limits particular to their circumstances.

In the 1920s there existed two broadly contrasting views of silent film. According to the first, the absence of sound constituted a deficiency whose remedy was eagerly awaited. It was thought that, without sound, the filmic reproduction of reality was somehow incomplete or less convincing. However, the first French avant-garde, the first Soviet film-makers and German expressionism articulated a very different conception of silent film. They sought out the specificity of cinema in a universal *visual* language. For the former, the invention of sound constituted a natural progression for cinema. One recognises, here, the aesthetic equivalent of the evolutionary paradigm already evoked above. For the latter – Lévi-Strauss would have doubtless been in this camp – the advent of sound brought about a degeneration of cinema and was to be resisted. In their 1928 manifesto, Alexandrov, Eisenstein and Poudovkinhe argued that films should maintain a deliberate mismatch between the visual elements and the sound-track. They saw this as one of the ways in which cinema could preserve its specificity and, in particular, its independence from theatre. One might say about the practitioners of this second kind of silent cinema, what Lévi-Strauss says about the art of the Northwest Coast Indians. It is 'an art form in which an exact equilibrium is established between the raw materials and the way in which they are used' (1989: 262; my translation). Far from being a hindrance to artistic invention, material obstacles constitute, for Lévi-Strauss, a precious spur to creativity, which is no doubt why he preferred the first forms of photography to its later developments.

Rather than develop conceptual schemas that exclude one form of art or another, in the manner of the author of the entry on Polynesian art, Lévi-Strauss seeks ways of integrating them, of mapping out their place in an overarching system. This is what Lévi-Strauss does in *The Savage Mind* where he argues that all art consists in a confrontation of necessity and contingency. He then goes on to account for the differences between art forms in terms of the different forms this contingency may take. He defines art as a 'dialogue with contingency' that can take place at one or more of three different moments of aesthetic creation: the occasion, the execution and the destination. In terms of the above discussion, these are the three domains in which the artist's freedom may be exercised. It is worth citing, here, Lévi-Strauss's explanation in full, as it provides a template for interrelating different forms of art, or artistic styles, practised by geographically or temporally distant populations:

It is only in the first case that [the contingent] takes the form of an event properly speaking, that is, of contingency exterior and prior to the creative act.

The artist perceives it from without as an attitude, an expression, a light effect or a situation . . . But the contingent can also play an intrinsic part in the course of execution itself, in the size or shape of the piece of wood the sculptor lays hands on, in the direction and quality of its grain, in the imperfections of his tools, in the resistance which his materials or project offer to the work in the course of its accomplishment, in the unforeseeable incidents arising during work. Finally, the contingent can be extrinsic as in the first case but posterior, instead of anterior, to the act of creation. This is the case whenever the work is destined for a specific end, since the artist will construct it with a view to its potential condition and successive uses in the future and so will put himself, consciously or unconsciously, in the place of the person for whose use it is intended. The process of artistic creation therefore consists in trying to communicate (within the immutable framework of a mutual confrontation of structure and accident) either with the *model* or with the *materials* or with the future *user* as the case may be . . . Each case roughly corresponds to a readily identifiable form of art: the first to the plastic arts of the West, the second to so-called 'primitive' or early art and the third to the applied arts. But it would be an oversimplification to take these identifications very strictly. All forms of art allow all three aspects and they are only distinguished from one another by the relative proportion of each. (1966b: 27; 1962b: 42–3)

Like Baudelaire, although for different reasons, Lévi-Strauss does not construe objects as inert or passive. They are not reducible to being simply that which is perceived. Nor do they belong, wholly and solely, to the 'outside' world. As we shall see in the chapters that follow, they are *mediators*. Through them we establish a relation to the world as well as to other human beings. They are one of the means by which we come to 'know' the world as well as construct a certain sense of self. As he puts it in *The Savage Mind*: 'A child's doll is no longer an enemy, a rival or even an interlocutor. In it and through it a person is made into a subject' (1966b: 23; 1962b: 38). The many different kinds of objects that we create – and in particular aesthetic objects – are in a vital sense part of us, extensions of our minds and bodies. In *The Way of the Masks*, Lévi-Strauss describes decorated boxes from British Columbia (1982: 8; 1979a: 11). Each one represents, in low-relief, as custom dictates, a bear, a shark or a beaver. But the animals have been dissected and rearranged so as to fit the box they adorn. The decorative process speaks not only of an unusual yet effective stylistic practice – each animal is represented from the front, from behind and from the side, yet constitutes a cohesive whole – but of the systems of belief that underpin this practice. The animal embodies a spirit whose role is to guard the treasures that the box contains. In this respect, Lévi-Strauss points out, the animal is not something added to the box. It is not, strictly speaking, a decoration. The box only acquires its function through the

animal, with which it has become one. The box is a box *and* an animal, at one and the same time. Here, object and décor, function and symbol, exist in symbiosis, and it is in part this which confers upon the object its 'aesthetic' value.

Objects – or at least hand-made objects – exteriorise and concretise mental processes. This explains their almost magical power, which is to connect us with the peoples of other times and cultures. They enable a deferred communication, bridging space and time. Lévi-Strauss writes about the objects that he discovered in war-time New York that they opened doors in the wall of industrial civilisation, enabling him to escape towards other worlds – like Alice through the looking glass (1987b: 262; 1983: 350).

Nowhere is the value attached to artefacts, and in particular works of art, more forcefully expressed than in the concluding paragraph of *Look Listen Read*:

Seen from the scale of millennia, the human passions blur. Time neither adds nor subtracts anything from the loves and hates experienced by the human species, nor from its commitments, struggles, and hopes: past and present always remain the same. Were some ten or twenty centuries of history to be suppressed at random, our understanding of human nature would not be appreciably affected. The only irreplaceable loss would be that of the works of art created during this period. For men and women differ, and even exist, only through their works . . . they alone bear evidence that, among human beings, something actually happened during the course of time. (1997: 185; 1993a: 176)

The reconciliation

Kant defines the concept of ‘totality’ – one of the twelve categories of understanding – as the combination of unity and plurality.¹ It is one of the ‘ancestral concepts of pure understanding’ (Kant 1998: 215) that we bring to the world, making it the object of a ‘possible experience’ and thereby, one might say, humanising it. It constitutes one of the fundamental building blocks out of which we construct our experience of reality. To remove the concept of ‘totality’ from our mental apparatus would alter our experience of the world in such a way that it would no longer be recognisable as human. Along with such ideas as ‘causality’ and ‘substance’, it forms an integral part of the mental apparatus that makes our experience of the world what it is. In more immediate experiential terms, however, the senses and ways in which we apprehend the world – *or do not apprehend the world* – as a totality are the object of endless negotiations. Psychoanalysis has perhaps revealed this most forcefully, by bringing to light the fragility of the integrity of the ego, of its sense of unity and hence of the unity of the world it apprehends. The experiences of the schizophrenic oscillate between what one might describe as a terrifying excess of ‘coherence’ (any event, even the most anodyne event, may become a sign and be used to construct a delusional narrative) and an excess of incoherence (a world of shattered identities). The extent to which the world appears to us as a coherent whole fluctuates and varies. We must constantly *work* at giving the world its unity, at totalising our experiences. And this work is never complete; we must endlessly start it again, thereby partaking in a form of creation that is no doubt intimately related to what we call aesthetic creation. The fulfilment of this duty is the condition upon

¹ An earlier version of this chapter was published in French in *L’Homme: Revue Française d’Anthropologie* (Wiseman 2005: 397–418).

which we are able to see ourselves as an integral part of the natural and social world. Finally, it is a form of work that is not only individual but collective, society itself constituting another totality that is perpetually under construction.

As I will try to show in this chapter, these or similar ideas are very much at the heart of Lévi-Strauss's theories about the nature of aesthetic perception as well as his understanding of 'wild' modes of thought, which both privilege mental processes that are 'totalising'. These processes are also very much a part of Lévi-Strauss's own intellectual make-up, of his 'Neolithic intelligence'. Among the character traits to which he confesses in some of his more personal asides is a dislike of chaos. He says that he has always been disturbed by disorder (or the irrational) and that whenever he has been confronted with it, he has felt compelled to try to discover an order behind the disorder, which is what he did when he reduced a vast number of heterogeneous marriage rules to a small number of 'elementary structures' or when he revealed that a nonsensical mythical narrative could be made sense of if one interprets it as a formal transformation of another mythical narrative. In an interview, he once summed up the fundamental aim of his four-volume study of Amerindian mythology, the *Mythologiques*, as follows: 'vaincre l'incohérence' (1991b: 141; 1988a: 197) ('to defeat incoherence'). And for Lévi-Strauss, this invariably means fitting seemingly disparate data into a coherent whole or system – he constructs a totality.

In what follows I will try to bring to light some of the ways in which Lévi-Strauss conceives the totality that is the world we inhabit and our problematic relationship to that totality. I will do so, in particular, by connecting various aspects of Lévi-Strauss's aesthetic and anthropological thought. In this respect, my aim in this chapter is not to formulate a critique of Lévi-Strauss's aesthetic theories, but to set them in a broader context and, in doing so, lay bare some of the basic ideas that underpin Lévi-Strauss's thinking. As we shall see, this process of cross-relating aesthetics and anthropology will also enable us to uncover something else, what one might call the mytho-poetic substratum of Lévi-Strauss's works.

In this chapter, I will show that Lévi-Strauss is penetrated at once by a strong desire to overcome the fundamental *discontinuity* that separates humanity from the world (nature from culture), thus making the world whole again, and the knowledge that it is an impossible task. In this respect, Lévi-Strauss's works may be seen to rest on the intuition of a contradiction inherent in the human condition. A closer examination of the way in which this contradiction is expressed, indirectly, through metaphor, will enable

us to draw a parallel between aspects of Lévi-Strauss's writings and those of Camus, in particular *Noces*.

THE WORLD IN A GRAIN OF SAND

Lévi-Strauss's aesthetic ideas are typically contained in what appear to be digressions, but are often not. This is the case, for example, of the theory of the work of art that is contained in the opening chapter of *The Savage Mind*, an anthropological work whose primary concern is the nature and function of classificatory systems in so-called 'primitive' societies and the description of what he calls 'wild' modes of thought. Lévi-Strauss presents the aesthetic digression as an attempt to explain the profound aesthetic emotion that he once experienced whilst contemplating a detail in a painting by the seventeenth-century French painter François Clouet (1522–72), a lace ruff reproduced, thread by thread, in a near perfect *trompe-l'œil* (1966b: 23; 1962b: 37). The basic proposition put forward by Lévi-Strauss in this 'digression' – one of the key propositions of Lévi-Straussian aesthetics – is that all works of art partake of the nature of scale models. His theory takes the form of a complex analogy, which I cannot examine here in all its aspects (I will return to it intermittently throughout the whole of this book, as well as to the affiliated analogy of *bricolage*). What matters in the present context is the central importance of the concept of totality in the conception of the work of art put forward in this analogy.

Lévi-Strauss's proposition that all works of art are essentially 'modèles réduits' is to be understood in a metaphorical sense. The creation of a work of art does not necessarily require a literal reduction in the scale of the object it 'represents'. Indeed, many works of art, whether paintings or sculptures, are larger than life – take for example César's famous gold thumb, a version of which stands, 12 meters high, on the Esplanade de la Défense in Paris (the example is mine and one that is unlikely to appeal to Lévi-Strauss's aesthetic sensibilities).

Lévi-Strauss's point is that, whatever the size of the work, the act of aesthetic 'representation' necessarily involves a sensory simplification – or 'reduction' – of the original object, which loses one or more of its 'original' dimensions. Indeed certain forms of art require, by definition, a reduction of this kind. Painting, for example, leaves out volume, and both painting and sculpture remove the object from the temporal continuum. More generally, every act of aesthetic 'representation' requires a simplification of the 'represented' object, were it simply in the fact that the artist must select certain aspect or facets

of the object and leave out others.² Art, says Lévi-Strauss, is necessarily schematic and derives from this feature its meaningfulness. The sensible dimensions taken away from the object during the process of aesthetic 'reduction' are replaced, in the aesthetic experience, by intelligible dimensions.

According to the theory of the 'modèle réduit', the result of this process of simplification is that the work of art is apprehended in a special way, one that entails, as Lévi-Strauss puts it, 'a sort of reversal in the process of understanding' (1966b: 23; 1962b: 38). Here is how Lévi-Strauss describes this phenomenon:

To understand a real object in its totality we always tend to work from its parts. The resistance it offers us is overcome by dividing it . . . In the case of miniatures, in contrast to what happens when we try to understand an object or living creature of real dimensions, knowledge of the whole precedes knowledge of the parts. And even if this is an illusion, the point of the procedure is to create or sustain the illusion, which gratifies the intelligence and gives rise to a sense of pleasure which can already be called aesthetic on these grounds alone. (1966b: 23–4; 1962b: 38)

Lévi-Strauss's proposition is that it is in the very nature of the work of art to be apprehended as a 'totality'—or rather, to be more precise, it enables the world ('represented' in the work of art) to be apprehended as a totality. And it is this which Lévi-Strauss puts forward as the source of aesthetic pleasure. The work of art fulfils here a quasi-magical function. Like a voodoo doll, it constitutes a mediating term between the creator of the object (or its 'consumer') and the sensible world, by means of which the world is 'mastered'. As Lévi-Strauss writes: 'Being smaller, the object as a whole seems less formidable. By being quantitatively diminished, it seems to us qualitatively simplified . . . this quantitative transposition extends and diversifies our power over a homologue of the thing, and by means of it the latter can be grasped, assessed and apprehended at a glance' (1966b: 23; 1962b: 38).

One understands now in what sense monumental works of art, such as César's giant *Thumb*, constitute 'modèles réduits'. César's works are centrally concerned with the complementary processes of compression (most famously, the compression of cars) and expansion. To make his *Thumb*, he made a cast of his own thumb which he then expanded mechanically (there are several versions of varying sizes). The finished work is a representation

² The 'modèle réduit' analogy implies an essentially mimetic conception of the function of the work of art, which limits the analogy's claim to universality. I will return to Lévi-Strauss's privileging of the mimetic paradigm, a recurring feature of his aesthetic thought, in chapters 4 and 6.

of a part of César's body (his thumb). In as much as his *Thumb* was made from a cast, it entertains a metonymic relationship with that body, from which it physically borrows its shape, thereby partaking of its very essence. The part, however, also stands – metaphorically – for the whole: not only the whole that is César, the artist (the thumb, as a fingerprint, is a form of signature) but the whole that is the world. In a deeper sense, César's thumb is a metaphor for the world, which it replaces and hence signifies. And it is in this sense that it is a 'modèle réduit', a universe in miniature, or in William Blake's words, 'a world in a grain of sand' – even if the grain of sand, here, is a giant thumb. César's 'compressions' can be interpreted in a similar way. A work such as *520 tonnes*, a giant cube of mangled metal in which one can make out various compressed shapes (several cars, a motor-bike, bicycles, etc.) can be read as a signifier of the totality that is the post-industrial world in which we live. Here, it would seem that César, tired of simply *signifying* the world in a grain of sand, has appropriated the forces of the industrial world (he used a car crusher) quite literally, and not without a certain sense of irony, to compress the modern world into a cube. One may nevertheless regret that by 'mechanising' the process of aesthetic 'reduction', César short-circuits one of the principal means by which the artist substitutes intelligible dimensions in place of sensible ones, thereby reducing the capacity of his work of art to signify.

THE TOTALISING FUNCTION

As I have already suggested, the digression in the course of which Lévi-Strauss introduces his theory of the work of art as 'modèle réduit' is a digression in appearance only. A web of hidden connections links the aesthetic ideas contained in it to the broader anthropological ideas that are of concern to him in *The Savage Mind*. What one may infer from this work (I will return to this at greater length in the following chapter) is that 'wild' thinking has, in different times and places, found different incarnations. It is the key to 'primitive' science, but also to mythical thought and, as we shall see, art. This explains why these modes of thought, despite their divergent evolutions and applications, share a set of features – the marks, as it were, of their 'wild' origin and, by extension, a key to their deeper purpose. What are these features?

These three modes of thought (scientific, mythical, artistic) resemble one another first of all in as much as they are all similarly anchored in the sensible and hence work with signs and images (concrete entities) rather than concepts (I will focus on this feature of 'wild' thinking in the next

chapter). Second, they provide the means, each at its own level of operation, of apprehending the world as a totality.

The Savage Mind is principally concerned with the *practical* applications of 'wild' modes of thought. One of Lévi-Strauss's main aims in this work is to demonstrate that there is indeed an authentic 'primitive' or 'wild' science, one that is no less logical or coherent than 'modern' science, even if its results differ from those of modern science. It is a science constructed entirely on a sensory exploration of 'reality'. This 'primitive' science, this 'logic of the concrete', is, according to the inventor of structural anthropology, one of the great creations of *la pensée sauvage*, and is responsible, amongst other things, for the many discoveries and technological developments that brought about the 'Neolithic revolution'. These 'discoveries' could not have occurred solely as a result of the observation of chance occurrences in nature, or as 'natural' responses to basic needs, Lévi-Strauss argues. They required that the world was for Neolithic mankind – the same holds true of so-called 'primitive' mankind – an object of intellectual inquiry. They required an attempt to grasp the nature of the world. And one of the lessons of *The Savage Mind* is that this attempt took the form of a conversion of percepts into symbolic systems, a systematising of sense data, which is thereby integrated into coherent totalities.

Here, the hidden connections in *The Savage Mind*, between the aesthetic digression provoked by the memory of Clouet's lace ruff and the broader anthropological theories formulated in this work, are brought to light. The basic function of the work of art is clearly visible in the classificatory processes that underpin concrete science.

Let us briefly sketch out Lévi-Strauss's theory of classification and, in particular, his interpretation of totemism. In the past, anthropologists tended to view totemism in terms of a mystical identification between a clan and its totemic animal. For Lévi-Strauss, it is but an aspect of a broader classificatory system that underpins the whole of social reality. His insight was to see that the differences between one species and another (for example, 'eagle' and 'bear') encode differences between clans. In other words, they are a means of establishing a social classification. Furthermore, the totemic animal constitutes a complex classificatory system that its users can extend at will, either towards the pole of the 'infinitely small' (by decomposing the totality that is the animal into its constituent parts, which each form other totalities – head, wings, claws, etc. – which can, in turn, be decomposed) or towards the pole of the 'infinitely large' (by replacing the animal in the collection of individuals that make up the species, and the species in the broader groupings that make up the animal kingdom).

Classificatory systems may thus be used, at the 'analytical' pole of the system, to establish increasingly minute differences, or, on the contrary, at the synthetic pole, to encompass reality in increasingly broad oppositions, such as the black and white sides of the Taoist Yin and Yang symbol. This malleability of totemic and indeed all classificatory systems – in César's terms, their ability to be compressed or expanded – enables the 'primitive' scientist to cast a conceptual net over any aspect of reality.

The work of art construed as a '*modèle réduit*' – construed as a 'mediator' between humanity and the world – appears to work in a similar way to these classificatory systems. What Lévi-Strauss writes about the totemic animal, namely that it is 'a conceptual tool with multiple possibilities for detotalizing or retotalizing any domain, synchronic or diachronic, concrete or abstract, natural or cultural' (1966b: 149; 1962b: 179–80), in many ways also applies to art. The processes of 'detotalisation' and 'retotalisation' are paralleled by those of aesthetic 'reduction' (accomplished by the artist) and reconstruction (accomplished by the artist and the consumer). The purpose of the 'mediation' accomplished by the work of art is to encompass the world in a totality, a purpose that rejoins the ultimate aim of the act of classification, which is, in Lévi-Strauss's words, 'to assign every single creature, object or feature to a place within a class' (1966b: 10; 1962b: 22) – the 'classes', in the case of art, being the many colours, shapes and forms with which artists re-create the diversity of the world. Bringing out the connection between art and classification more explicitly still, Lévi-Strauss writes: 'classificatory schemes . . . allow the natural and social universe to be grasped as an organized whole' (1966b: 135; 1962b: 164); which is also, arguably, one of the key functions of the work of art (although, of course, not its only one). It should be added that the conception of the work of art as an 'organised totality', that I am placing, here, at the core of structural aesthetics, does not preclude the possibility that such a totality may contain ambiguous or 'undecidable' elements, or that it may be in a state of perpetual reconstruction – i.e. unfinished – as is the case with series of Amerindian myths caught in endless chains of mythical transformations.

In *Myth and Meaning*, Lévi-Strauss evokes 'the totalitarian ambition of the savage mind' (1978a: 7), an ambition that we can now see as one of the principal family traits of the various modes of thought to which this 'mind' gave birth. He characterises its ambition, which is therefore also present in aesthetic thought, as follows: 'its aim is to reach by the shortest possible means a general understanding of the universe – and not only a general but a *total* understanding' (1978a: 17).

The totalities that both art and classificatory systems construct out of the fragments of experience may be illusory, but this does not detract from what Lévi-Strauss perceives to be their essential value, namely to appease the anxiety that human beings feel when confronted with the essentially contingent nature of the world. In this respect, art and classification fulfil what one may call a 'totalising function', using the expression in a sense derived from Lévi-Strauss (he uses a number of synonymous expressions), to designate a symbolic operation that is a response to an impulse to confer upon experience the character of a totality – a 'will-to-order' or 'need for order', in Lévi-Strauss's words (1966b: 10; 1962b: 22) – that structuralism presents as universal.³ Translated into psychoanalytic terms, one might say that the purpose of this 'totalising function' is analogous to what Wilfred Bion called 'containment', a concept used to designate an individual's capacity (in the first instance, a mother) to internalise and 'contain' the anxiety or fear (affective contents) expressed by someone else (the mother's child).⁴ It is even possible to see in certain modernist works of art (the distorted human figures of Francis Bacon are a good example) the special case described by Bion when the emotional charge of this affective 'content' is so great that the 'container' is deformed or fragmented by it (failed containment).

In Lévi-Straussian theory, the 'totalising function' does not manifest itself uniquely, or indeed primarily, at the level of individual thought or creation, the level which interests me here. It manifests itself primarily at the level of collective creation, or rather the creation of collectivities, i.e. social groups. In this connection, it is integral to the fulfilment of what Lévi-Strauss calls the 'symbolic function', as the theory of shamanism already discussed in the introduction illustrates very well. As we have seen, the Cuna shaman uses myths that reflect the group's conception of the world to figure the inner states of his patient. He creates a mythical topography of an inner landscape, integrating pain, which is always 'outside of any system' (1963a: 197; 1958: 218)⁵ into 'a whole where everything is meaningful'. In another case, a young boy accused of witchcraft incriminates himself at his own trial. In doing so, he escapes conviction, for he understands that what the group wants of him is that he confirm the

³ A different sense is given to the notion of 'totalisation' by Sartre in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.

⁴ I have already invoked this notion in the introduction with regards to the shaman's therapeutic use of language. This further confirms the necessity of a pluridisciplinary approach to understanding symbolism, whose function is revealed, here, at the junction of anthropology, psychoanalysis and aesthetics.

⁵ I have amended the translation.

veracity of the magical beliefs whereby the social group is able to assign a cause to an otherwise inexplicable illness. The analysis of 'symbolic efficacy' in *Structural Anthropology* reveals a social dynamic that is at the very basis of the relationship between individual and group, whose purpose is to fulfil the sociological equivalent of the totalising function, namely, the integration of individual experiences into a system of collective representations (an ideology). The implication of Lévi-Strauss's analysis is that this form of totalisation is constitutive of the group as such.

The same 'totalising function' that we have just traced to art, 'primitive' classification and the construction of social order also occupies a fundamental place, as I have already said, in Lévi-Strauss's conceptions regarding the nature of mythical thought. These conceptions shed new light on the relationship between aesthetic creation and totalisation. What the theory of mythical invention elaborated by Lévi-Strauss reveals is the importance, in totalising processes, of the special logic of metaphor – a metaphor constituting something like a myth in miniature.

A metaphor is an assemblage of disparate ideas, a linguistic operation very similar to what Lévi-Strauss calls *bricolage*, since it brings together seemingly distant or unconnected words or images and makes a new whole out of them. And myths – or at least 'primitive' myths – are, in the Lévi-Straussian conception, essentially a series of interlocking extended metaphors. How is this?

A myth, in Lévi-Strauss's theory, is a logical tool that is used by a social group to 'solve' – symbolically, at least – various kinds of problems. Spurred on by the need to find a way of dealing with a problem (frequently a logical contradiction or paradox inherent in that group's system of belief), analogical thought is set in motion: myths start to generate metaphors. For myths do not 'solve' the problems around which they revolve, in the way in which a philosopher or scientist might 'solve' a problem. Like poetry or literature, they find metaphorical equivalents for them. The principal virtue of myths is to transpose one problem into the terms of a formally similar one, belonging to another domain, an operation that they endlessly repeat, to the point of 'exhaustion', as they follow their 'spiral' development. Falling short of providing a definitive solution to the problems that they deal with, myths content themselves with linking these problems up and showing that they can be seen as analogous to one another, hence their 'layered' structure. A myth consists in a 'stack' of codes, each code corresponding to another extended metaphor.

In the series of interviews conducted with Didier Eribon, Lévi-Strauss characterises mythical thought in opposition to the Cartesian method

of dividing up a problem: 'When faced with a problem, myth thinks of it as homologous to problems raised in other domains: cosmological, physical, moral, juridical, social, etc.' (1991b: 139; 1988a: 194). The 'totalising function' that is characteristic of 'wild' modes of thought is fulfilled, in myth, by this faculty to create complex analogies between seemingly unrelated phenomena, in other words to think metaphorically. Which is what Lévi-Strauss says when he comments about the logic that is specific to myths: 'We reason a bit like that when, asked to give an explanation, we answer with "that's when . . ." or "it's like . . ." It is laziness on our part, but mythic thought puts this procedure to such a supple and systematic use that it replaces proof' (1991b: 140; 1988a: 195). Let us illustrate.

There exists a series of Amerindian myths that tell the story of a journey, made in a canoe, by a couple consisting of the moon and the sun (see *Mythologiques*, vol. III, part 3). In Amerindian thought night-time is construed as a *disjunction* between the sky and the earth and day-time as a *conjunction* of the sky and the earth. According to Lévi-Strauss's interpretation of this myth, at the level of its 'astronomical code' (or metaphor), the function of the canoe in this series of myths is to keep 'conjunction' and 'disjunction' at the right distance from one another and thereby ensure the proper alternation of day and night. This is what happens when the canoe is positioned at the mid-point in its journey, at equal distance from the pole of the 'near' and that of the 'far'. However, this ideal state of affairs is not always maintained and other myths in the series evoke the result of either an excessive *distance* or an excessive *proximity* between the moon and the sun. In each case, the result is a dysfunctional state of affairs: either the absolute divorce of light and dark or their dangerous fusion.

Read in terms of the astronomical code (metaphor) that constitutes one of its levels of reading, this series of myths appears to be about the nature of cosmological order, how it was instituted and how it is maintained. However, this astronomical code interlocks with another, a sociological code, where the story of the journey of the moon and the sun takes on an altogether different significance.

Translated into the terms of the sociological code that constitutes the next level of reading of these myths, the opposition between near and far, light and dark, disjunction and conjunction becomes – is transformed into – that between an excessively close marriage – i.e. incestuous – and an excessively distant one – i.e. with a foreigner or enemy (a situation myths evoke in the motif of the marriage of a male hero and an animal – here marriage occurs beyond even the limits of the human species). These are the two excesses (*sociological* disruptions) against which society needs to guard itself in order

to guarantee the proper functioning of the institution of marriage and hence *the regular alternation of generations* (the biological equivalent of the alternation of night and day).

In keeping with the principle enunciated above, that a myth does not solve the problems around which it develops but merely converts them into another code – gives it another metaphorical expression – the answer of Amerindian mythology to the sociological problem ‘who should I marry?’ is: someone who is neither closer nor further than the moon is from the sun when night alternates regularly with day.

Myths provide a system of metaphors (forming a logical armature or ‘schema’) to encode a problem and then seek out other homologous problems and establish between them a series of correlations, thus integrating them into a single totality. Like the work of art construed as a ‘*modèle réduit*’, the metaphors (‘codes’) developed by ‘primitive’ myths enable human beings to apprehend the world as a complex whole whose many parts (and problems) are all interrelated – in ‘correspondence’ with one another. In this way, ‘primitive’ myths, like the classificatory ‘net’ described above or the work of art, aim to ‘enclose the world in a grain of sand’, and create the illusion that it can be mastered.

In the pages that precede, I have shown that the fulfilling of the will-to-order through the ‘totalising function’ – the integration of seemingly disparate elements into a coherent system and, by extension, *of the subject into the world he/she inhabits* – is a common feature of Lévi-Strauss’s account of the classificatory activities pursued by so-called ‘primitive’ populations, itself the basis of ‘primitive’ science, of certain rituals, of mythical thought and of aesthetic creation and perception. The common feature of these modes of thought – other than their anchoring in the sensible – is their need to think the world as an ordered totality.

STRUCTURALISM AND TOTALISATION

The ‘totalising function’ that Lévi-Strauss identifies at work in ‘wild’ modes of thought is also, in many respects, a feature of Lévi-Strauss’s own way of thinking. This is true at a number of different levels. It was Yvan Simonis who first commented on the similarity that exists between the structural emphasis on replacing elements in the total system of which they are part, and the ‘reversal in the process of understanding’ (1966b: 23; 1962b: 38) that characterises the work of art construed as a ‘*modèle réduit*’. In both cases, the aim is to place the whole before the parts

(whether logically or chronologically), hence Simonis's thought-provoking thesis that 'art, here, appears to fulfil the very programme of structuralism' and conversely that 'the activity of structuralism is comparable to that of the artist' (Simonis 1980: 309, my translation). In the context of the present chapter, we would say that both aim to fulfil the 'totalising function'.

Chris Johnson, more recently, identifies a 'will-to-coherence' present in the construction of Lévi-Strauss's oeuvre which he presents essentially in terms of a problematic 'closure' of its theories and arguments (2003a: 180–91). He identifies three levels at which this closure operates. The first is heuristic and consists in the replication of a certain 'style' of exposition, i.e. of a certain logical pattern in the presentation of arguments. The second is methodological and consists in the replication of modes of analysis, i.e. types of arguments, of which he identifies five. These are: (1) the reduction of a complex whole to a combination of a small number of traits; (2) the reduction of the relationship between systems to a relationship of transformation; (3) the invocation of the principle of choice from a limited set of virtual possibilities in the analysis of the historical development of systems; (4) the invocation of a principle of 'coalescence' concomitant with a passage from the discontinuous to the continuous in the analysis of the genesis of systems; and (5) the resolution of hierarchical relationships into relations of complementarity. The third and final level of closure is autobiographical and consists in what Johnson sees as Lévi-Strauss's particularly problematic tendency to assimilate *himself* with the supposedly neutral and objective subject of anthropological enquiry (2003a: 186–7).

As I have already suggested on a number of occasions and will continue to try and show throughout this book, the nature of Lévi-Strauss's *texts*, despite a certain undeniable propensity to articulate totalising theories, strikes me as more ambiguous, multilayered and polysemic than Johnson's characterisation suggests. The level of theory, as we shall see, is inseparable from a mytho-poetic level of reading, the level of the concept from that of metaphor ('bricolage' is a good example), the level of methodological development from that of the expression of a structural *imaginary*. If Lévi-Strauss's early works in particular, as Johnson shows, display a marked concern with introducing a certain level of methodological rigour in anthropology, and, by importing the methods of structural linguistics, with establishing the scientificity of this discipline (but even his early works are not *reducible* to this project), his later works, in particular the *Mythologies*, attain a level of generic complexity that reflects the complexity

and ambiguity of their underlying aims. It is best summed up in Lévi-Strauss's claim that the *Mythologiques* are structured like a symphony and that it would be possible one day for a composer to write its musical counterpart. Lévi-Strauss's canonical formula epitomises a formalism that a commentator such as Chris Johnson might be inclined to see as indicative of a form of closure sometimes associated with structuralism. But the canonical formula has found numerous echoes, in particular in the domain of aesthetics (Scubla 2004). At the height of its formalism, structuralism transcends itself and becomes something else. The canonical formula captures an *intuition* that enables a certain 'totalisation' of the data (it reveals a recurring pattern in mythical transformations and enables a passage to other creative acts). But, as with many of Lévi-Strauss's other theories, this theoretical/methodological act of 'totalisation' is *attempted* and *provisional*. It is put forward to be tested by Lévi-Strauss himself and others. In this respect totalisation is not equal to closure. The process of understanding is inherently related to a dynamic whereby acts of totalisation are attempted and then undone, by those who have attempted them, or by others. The construction of meaning is inseparable from its opposite, as the metaphor of *bricolage* illustrates amply. In this connection, Lévi-Strauss's totalising strategies – his distinctive way of addressing problems – do not close down the field of thought. They should be seen, on the contrary, as *productive* acts of interpretation because of the reactions and counter-reactions they initiate. I would tend to view Lévi-Strauss's works as presenting an eminently *open* body of thought. This is true at the level of content – Lévi-Strauss's interdisciplinarity is a mark of this openness – but also at that of form. The openness of Lévi-Strauss's works – which increases as they develop over time – is a function of a particular mode of writing, of their 'literariness', a question to which I will return in greater length in subsequent chapters. I agree with Johnson that it is doubtful that the so-called structural 'method' constitutes a reproducible methodology in a scientific sense; but I don't see this as detracting from the value of Lévi-Strauss's works, which try to articulate not a method in this sense but rather a series of 'ways of seeing', a body of interrelated ideas and convictions that are the product of a singular world-view that casts a distinct light on a series of different objects, in the way that certain painters systematically reinterpret the world according to a style that is as original as it is immediately recognisable.

There is yet another sense in which structural anthropology may be seen to fulfil the 'totalising function', one that is perhaps more fundamental

than those discussed by Simonis and Johnson. It relates to the epistemological premises that underpin the many theories that Lévi-Strauss develops. In the manner of myth itself, these are constructed, in part at least, on a series of oppositions, which they seek to overcome (they are thus, contrary to popular belief, based on a *rejection* of a certain kind of binary thinking). Be it the opposition between the sensible and the intelligible, the mythic and the logical, the rational and the emotional, the 'primitive' and the civilised, Lévi-Strauss's point is that Western thought, until now, has always sought to *divide*. By contrast, the fundamental aim of the Lévi-Straussian project, is to reunite these opposites – to see as one, as he puts it himself, what others have divided. As he argues convincingly in *Totemism*, the relegation of the 'savage' (the term is derived from the Latin *silvaticus*, 'from the forest') to a state of nature was one of the means by which Judeo-Christian thought was able to reject – indeed exorcise – the idea of a continuity between the animal and the human kingdoms, incompatible with religious beliefs (1964b: 3). In a similar way that Freud showed that 'normal' thought was not qualitatively different from 'pathological' thought, Lévi-Strauss has shown that 'primitive' thinking, far from being alien to logocentric thought, is in many ways a part of it, just as logic is a part of 'wild' thinking. This integrative gesture is synonymous with the anthropological project of bringing to light the mechanism of *pensée sauvage*, which Lévi-Strauss is careful to differentiate from 'la pensée des sauvages' (his object is 'savage thought' not the thinking of 'savages'). The key point here is this: that Lévi-Strauss construes the very act of (anthropological) understanding essentially as the *overcoming of a discontinuity*, i.e. as a 'making whole'. At yet another level, this gesture is visible in his materialism. Lévi-Strauss believes that the structures that he uncovers in social reality reflect unconscious structures in the mind, which are themselves rooted in the biological functioning of the brain (the sense organs mediating between the two). In principle, the end point of any structural interpretation – although it is doubtful that any actual structural interpretation has ever reached it – is when the hidden structures that it uncovers are finally shown to reflect unconscious mental structures. Structuralism tries to close a vast loop that traces in reverse the genesis of social institutions to their source in the patterning operations of the brain. The structural analysis of culture aims to reveal that the macrocosm that is social reality is contained in the microcosm that is the human brain, where we will find the 'modèle réduit' of all possible social systems. Here, structuralism fulfils the totalising function by reintegrating human beings, and the mind, into the physical world to which they belong, and from which they

have been separated by the emergence of symbolic thought (we shall return to this later).⁶

The place where this conception of the act of understanding as the overcoming of discontinuity is perhaps most forcefully expressed is the famous passage in *Tristes Tropiques* in which he evokes one of his most cherished early memories, a walk he once took in the Languedoc region along the fault-line that separates two geological strata belonging to different epochs. Lévi-Strauss recalls the moment when certain seemingly anodyne signs – the neighbouring presence of plants that grow in different soils and of ammonites belonging to different stages in the evolution of the same organism – suddenly reveal the presence of the fault-line and, hence, the story of the formation of the landscape, the key to its ‘meaning’. Here is what Lévi-Strauss writes about this experience which he invites us to read as an allegory of the very process of understanding, for it provides ‘the very image of knowledge-in-action, with the difficulties that it may encounter and the satisfactions it may hope to enjoy’ (1963b: 59; 1955a: 59):

And sometimes the miracle happens. On one side and the other of a hidden crevice we find two green plants of different species. Each has chosen the soil which suits it; and we realize that within the rock are two ammonites, one of which has involutions less complex than the other’s. We glimpse, that is to say, a difference of many thousands of years; time and space suddenly [become one]; the living diversity of that moment juxtaposes one age and the other and perpetuates them. Thought and sensibility take on a new dimension, in which every drop of sweat, every movement of muscle, every quick-drawn breath becomes the symbol of a story; and, as my body reproduces the particular gait of that story, so does my mind embrace its meaning. I feel myself [immersed in a denser form of intelligibility, in which time and space answer one another and speak languages that have at last been reconciled]. (1963b: 60; 1955a: 59)⁷

⁶ Structuralism attempts to overcome Cartesian dualism. In the context of a discussion of the resurgence of scientific interest in the qualitative dimensions of reality and the relevance of this kind of research for an understanding of the nature of mythical thought Lévi-Strauss writes: ‘[Science] will lead us to believe that, between life and thought, there is not the absolute gap which was accepted as a matter of fact by the seventeenth-century philosophical dualism. If we are led to believe that what takes place in our mind is something not substantially or fundamentally different from the basic phenomenon of life itself, and if we are led then to the feeling that there is not this kind of gap which is impossible to overcome between mankind on the one hand and all other living beings – not only animals but also plants – on the other, then perhaps we will reach more wisdom, let us say, than we think we are capable of’ (1995a: 24). It is worth noting that Lévi-Strauss’s materialism is the starting point of a moral philosophy. The bridging of the gap between life and thought should lead us to a superior *wisdom*.

⁷ I have amended the translation to try and preserve, as much as possible, the veiled literary allusions contained in the original.

The act of understanding is described, in this passage, essentially as the overcoming of a discontinuity – in fact a series of discontinuities, between space and time, between past and present and between the sensible and the intelligible ('time and space suddenly commingle; the living diversity of that moment juxtaposes one age and the other and perpetuates them. Thought and sensibility take on a new dimension' (1963b: 60; 1955a: 59)). Through the act of understanding, differences perceived in the here and now are suddenly connected to their ancient causes and become the living evidence of a necessary order that surrounds the observer. The outcome is the sudden promotion of the landscape, initially perceived as chaotic (made up of a collection of unrelated fragments) into a signifying whole, a totality. And, furthermore, a whole from which Lévi-Strauss no longer feels excluded, but to which he belongs, integrally and *physically*, since the past-made-present by the observation of sensible differences in the landscape is a past to which Lévi-Strauss's body also belongs: 'every drop of sweat, every movement of muscle, every quick-drawn breath becomes the symbol of a story; and, as my body reproduces the particular gait of that story, so does my mind embrace its meaning' (1963b: 60; 1955a: 59). What Lévi-Strauss describes here is not simply the act of interpreting the landscape, in the way that a geologist might, although that is the first stage. It is a transformation of his relationship to the landscape that is such that the very act of perceiving it – sensorially – brings with it an understanding of the hidden order it conceals and of Lévi-Strauss's place in that order. The result is a kind communion with nature.

This short but crucial passage in Lévi-Strauss's works entertains a series of hidden connections to other texts by Lévi-Strauss and by other authors, among them an opera by Wagner and a poem by Baudelaire. Its full significance can only be appreciated in the light of these connections. Let us examine them, starting with the Lévi-Straussian connections.

Although it may not be apparent at first, this passage is in fact closely connected to the theory of the work of art as a 'modèle réduit', which I discussed at the beginning of this chapter. In my above summary of the theory of the 'modèle réduit', I left out an important part of Lévi-Strauss's argument. He emphasises the fact that art differs from (modern) science, the work of the 'bricoleur' from that of the 'engineer',⁸ in as much as the

⁸ Lévi-Strauss's famous distinction between two kinds of creators, the *bricoleur* and the engineer, is already made by Paul Valéry in his *Degas, Danse, Dessin* first published in 1938: 'I sometimes think that the work of the artist is of a very ancient type and that the artist himself is a survival, a worker or artisan of a kind that is heading for extinction. He creates in the privacy of his home, uses techniques

latter always works on a scale of 1: 1 – there is no *transposition* of the object – while the former always works at a reduced scale; i.e. he/she creates a *metaphorical equivalent* of the object (the image of a lace ruff), and not the real object (an actual lace ruff). So much has already been said. However, Lévi-Strauss draws from this difference an important conclusion for his theory of the work of art that I had left aside. The work of art, he continues, operates a synthesis between a structure and an event, or rather several structures and several events. What does this mean? For the ‘engineer’ a lace ruff is reducible to a diagram. This diagram provides a key to the invisible structure of the lace ruff; it contains all the necessary information for the ‘engineer’ to make another ruff, should he/she wish to do so. The work of art (Clouet’s painting of the lace ruff) must capture the same hidden structure that is formalised by the engineer’s diagram (it requires an intimate knowledge of the *internal* structure of the lace ruff (1966b: 25; 1962b: 40)) but at the same time it must also capture a particular lace ruff, as it exists, at a particular moment in time, worn by a particular individual, in other words as it exists caught in a unique web of relationships to elements that are of the order of the ‘event’, and which the ‘engineer’ cannot reproduce: the shape and colour of the neck of the person wearing it, the kind of light falling upon it, etc.

Here, the work of the artist also consists in overcoming a series of discontinuities: ‘his genius consists in uniting internal and external knowledge, a “being” and a “becoming”, in producing with his brush [a] synthesis of one or more . . . structures and one or more . . . events’ (1966b: 25; 1962b: 40).

that are at once personal and empirical, lives in close proximity to the chaos of his tools, sees what he wants and not what surrounds him, uses broken pots, domestic scrap metal, condemned objects . . . Maybe this state of affairs is changing and the peculiar individual who accommodates himself with these makeshift tools is being replaced by the occupant of a laboratory, a man impeccably dressed in white, who wears rubber gloves, follows a precise schedule, only ever makes use of specialised instruments and apparatuses, each having its place and precise application? . . . Until now, chance has not yet been eliminated from our actions, mystery from our procedures, spontaneity from our schedule; but I guarantee nothing’ (1998a: 39–44, my translation; ellipses in original). Many aspects of Lévi-Strauss’s *bricoleur* metaphor are contained in this portrait of the artist (Degas was probably Valéry’s model). Like his antecedent, the *bricoleur* works with ‘odds and ends’ (debris) that are ready at hand, while his alter-ego, the engineer, uses a set of tools that are specially adapted to his projects. The *bricoleur* and the artist are masters of improvisation. They allow chance to play a part in the creative process whereas the engineer seeks to abolish chance and totally control his materials and procedures (nature). There is in both Lévi-Strauss’s and Valéry’s works a similar nostalgia for a fast disappearing state of affairs associated with an artisan form of knowledge whose appeal lies in its somewhat haphazard and rudimentary procedures. One should not, however, jump to the conclusion that the above passage constitutes a source. As Lévi-Strauss comments about this passage: ‘I didn’t know Valéry’s text. At the time [of writing *The Savage Mind*], I hadn’t read him much. I have made up for that since and I have often discovered that Valéry had expressed before me, and much better than me, ideas that I thought to be my own. I would certainly have used this passage if I had known about it.’ Letter to the author, 15 July 2006, my translation.

As with the experience described in the geological allegory, the aesthetic representation of an object – in as much as it reconciles normally irreconcilable points of view of the object (internal/external; in time/extracted from time) – integrates that object into a coherent whole (here a man-made whole as opposed to a natural one), just as the experience of the walk integrates Lévi-Strauss into that other whole which is nature.

Lévi-Strauss explains the source of the aesthetic emotion brought about by the contemplation of the lace ruff as follows: 'The aesthetic emotion is the result of this union between the structural order and the order of events, which is brought about within a thing created by man' (1966b: 25; 1962b: 37). An explanation that may also be applied to the emotion that Lévi-Strauss feels whilst on his walk in the Languedoc, when the landscape suddenly transforms before his eyes and he finds that the series of seemingly meaningless 'events' that, until then, had made up his experience of the walk – from the flexing of a muscle to the falling of a drop of sweat – become the elements of an intelligible order or 'structure'.

One of the key phrases that Lévi-Strauss uses to describe the moment when the Languedoc landscape transforms – 'time and space suddenly become one' (1963b: 60; 1955a: 59) – is in fact a veiled citation, taken from Act I of Wagner's *Parsifal*, an opera for which Lévi-Strauss has a predilection (it is Gurnemanz who is speaking to Perceval, and who says: 'See, my son, to space here time doth change'). Lévi-Strauss will quote this phrase again, nearly thirty years later, in an article entitled 'De Chrétien de Troyes à Richard Wagner' (published in *A View from Afar*). Significantly, he will then say about it that it is 'probably the most profound definition that anyone has ever offered for myth' (1987b: 219; 1983: 301). Indeed, the process of understanding, such as Lévi-Strauss describes it in the geological allegory outlined above, constitutes far more than what science might construe as 'understanding'. It is an act of 'totalisation', an overcoming of discontinuities, whose ultimate reward is a *mythical* experience of time. Through the act of understanding, time and space (structure and event) are – in a kind of Proustian condensation (the 'act' of understanding is not so much an 'act' as an experience that seems to occur, like Proustian recollection, unintentionally) – brought together (made whole) and thereby returned to their 'primitive' unity.

The outcome of this process of 'understanding' is that the sensible world is transformed into a text – no longer opaque, no longer the wall against which human understanding anthropomorphically bangs its head, but a series of signs ('forest of symbols', Baudelaire might have said) that may be read and understood. Lévi-Strauss comments in *Saudades do Brasil*: 'I realized that a

landscape, when looked at and analyzed by a master, can become an exciting reading experience, as capable of training the mind as a commentary on a play by Racine' (1995c: 46; 1994a: 46). The world, from being alien, becomes saturated with meaning, in the same way that it is when apprehended through the prism of a classificatory system, a myth or a work of art.

Lévi-Strauss describes the intellectual reward that is the result of the discovery of the hidden order behind the Languedoc landscape in the following terms: 'I feel myself immersed in a denser form of intelligibility, in which time and space answer one another and speak languages that have at last been reconciled' (1963b: 60; 1955a: 59). Lévi-Strauss's words, here, also describe very well another kind of experience, that of aesthetic emotion, a phenomenon that one may see, now, as the outcome of the fulfilling of the 'totalising function', whether it occurs through the accomplishment of an act of understanding, the construction of a classificatory system, the contemplation of a landscape or that of a work of art.

Among the Osage Indians the bow and arrow figure in the list of totemic clan names. Religious texts reveal that one totemic arrow is usually painted red, the other black, and that this opposition corresponds to that between day and night. This symbolism is echoed in the bow, the outside of which is black, the inside red. Lévi-Strauss interprets this symbolic system as follows: 'shooting with the red and black bow, using alternatively a red and a black arrow, is an expression of Time, itself measured by the alternation of day and night' (1966b: 142–3; 1962b: 172). The way in which Osage symbolism captures time, in a simple yet elegant logical schema, evokes the aesthetics of modern art – Mondrian comes to mind. Or perhaps one could see the shooting of the arrow as a distant equivalent of a Happening. The symbolism associated with the bow and arrow confers upon the seemingly anodyne actions of the Indian using it a more profound significance. He uses his bow and arrow not only to hunt, but also, in a sense, symbolically to capture time, which is what Lévi-Strauss succeeds in doing in the course of his walk in the Languedoc. The Osage firing the bow does this by inscribing time – the arrow of time – in the cyclical recurrence of day and night, red and black. As a result, his gestures become 'immersed in a denser form of intelligibility'. They are totalising gestures. They too, like Clouet's painting of a lace ruff, like Lévi-Strauss's transformation of a landscape, integrate an event (the shooting of an arrow) and a structure (the symbolic system for which the bow and arrow is the basis), thus transforming human experience by inscribing it in a closed symbolic system. And these gestures, although not intended as aesthetic (it would be more accurate to talk of 'para-aesthetics'), fulfil the

criteria that all art must fulfil to bring about aesthetic emotion: 'events in this sense are only one mode of the contingent whose integration (perceived as necessary) into a structure gives rise to the aesthetic emotion. This is so whatever the type of art in question' (1966b: 27; 1962b: 42).

In the preceding pages, I have shown that Lévi-Strauss's conception of the act of understanding, at least such as it is formulated in the geological allegory contained in *Tristes Tropiques*, conceals a theory of aesthetic perception. Hermeneutics and aesthetics come together, here, in the common realisation of the 'totalising function', whose ultimate value is thereby brought to light: to confer upon the world a 'denser form of intelligibility'.

NUPTIALS

If we examine more closely the allegory passage from *Tristes Tropiques*, we notice that Lévi-Strauss qualifies this 'denser form of intelligibility' by saying that it is one in which 'time and space answer one another and speak languages that have at last been reconciled' (1963b: 60; 1955a: 59), a formula that echoes certain verses from Baudelaire's famous sonnet 'Correspondances', a poem to which we will have the opportunity of returning on a number of occasions in the chapters that follow. In Baudelaire's sonnet it is perfumes and colours that 'answer one another'. Lévi-Strauss's choice of words is revealing of the deeper system of ideas that lies behind this passage and which belongs to what one might call the mytho-poetic foundations of Lévi-Strauss's works.

There is another text in Lévi-Strauss's works that makes references to this sonnet, one that, significantly, deals explicitly with art and aesthetic emotion. It is his well-known description of the ground-floor room at the American Museum of Natural History, conceived by Franz Boas and devoted to the art of the Northwest Coast Indians, an art with which Lévi-Strauss claims to have an almost 'carnal bond' (1982: 10; 1979a: 12). I shall cite here only a brief extract:

There is in New York . . . a magic place where the dreams of childhood hold a rendezvous, where century-old tree trunks sing and speak, where indefinable objects watch out for the visitor, with the anxious stare of human faces, where animals of superhuman gentleness join their little paws like hands in prayer for the privilege of building the palace of the beaver for the chosen one, of guiding him to the realm of the seals, or of teaching him, with a mystic kiss, the language of the frog or the kingfisher . . . The dance masks . . . each one imbued with mystery and austerity were proofs of the omnipresence of the supernatural and the proliferation of myths. Upsetting the peace of everyday life, the masks' primal message retains so much power that even today the prophylactic insulation of the showcases fails to

muffle its communication. Stroll for an hour or two across this hall so thick with 'living pillars.' By way of another correspondence, the words of the poet translate exactly the native term designating the sculptured posts used to support house beams: posts that are not so much things as living beings 'with friendly eyes,' since in days of doubt and torment, they too let out 'confused words,' guide the dweller of the house, advise and comfort him. (1982: 3, 5, 7; 1979a: 7–9)

Lévi-Strauss has remarked that Baudelaire's sonnet has a 'mysterious Alaskan-like atmosphere' (1943: 180), and this is no doubt in part why he referred to it in the above passage. The sonnet creates the image of an anthropomorphically populated natural world, similar to the one to which the animals-cum-mythical-beings displayed in the Natural History Museum belong. In both, it is no longer human beings who observe nature but nature that observes humans. But the significance of the references to Baudelaire's sonnet – a poem about the quest for a lost unity – is more than simply a question of atmospheric resemblances. They enable Lévi-Strauss to encode a 'myth' deeply rooted in his works, that of the *reconciliation of nature and culture*. One may interpret this 'myth' as the poetic (metaphorical) expression of the 'totalising function'.

The motif that Lévi-Strauss borrows from 'Correspondances' is that of a dialogue unfolding in nature. He uses it to express a slightly different idea, that of the reinstitution of an interrupted communication. In the *Tristes Tropiques* passage, it is a communication between space and time, which finally 'answer one another'. In *The Way of the Masks*, it is a communication between human beings and animals. As Lévi-Strauss arrives in the ground-floor room of the Museum of Natural History, he imagines that he is beckoned by animal figurines that want to teach him in a 'mystic kiss the language of the frog or the kingfisher' (1982: 3; 1979a: 7, 9). In Baudelaire's sonnet, the poet becomes the witness to a dialogue unfolding *in* nature. The sounds, colours and perfumes reply to *one another*. In *The Way of the Masks*, what Lévi-Strauss imagines is a dialogue *between* humanity and nature. In the sonnet, the poet is a mere listener; Lévi-Strauss imagines himself talking with the animals. For both Lévi-Strauss and Baudelaire, however, this extension of the circuits of communication to the natural world renders it once again a 'familiar' place.

Overcoming the 'prophylactic' barrier of the display cabinets – symbolically, the barrier between the human world and the animal kingdom – Lévi-Strauss, with the help of animal-guides, embarks on a journey that is the realisation of a fantasy of sorts, that of a return to nature.⁹ It is also a

⁹ This is, in another context, what Simonis calls Lévi-Strauss's 'passion for incest'.

journey into the world of 'primitive' myths, since these tell stories that belong to times when humans and animals did not yet belong to differentiated kingdoms. Metaphors, here, are reparatory. They allow Lévi-Strauss to imagine a remedy to the tragic division between nature and culture that he is elsewhere forced to acknowledge, as for example in his interviews with Didier Eribon: 'despite [all] the ink spilled by the Judeo-Christian tradition to conceal it, no situation seems more tragic, more offensive to heart and mind, than that of a humanity coexisting and sharing the joys of a planet with other living species yet being unable to communicate with them' (1991b: 139; 1988a: 193). In the passage that begins *The Way of the Masks*, the motif of the reconciliation of humanity and nature is encoded in that of the learning of the secret language of animals and that of the journey into nature.

Without suggesting an influence, there is an affinity between these Lévi-Straussian motifs and certain aspects of Camus' works, in particular *Noctes*. The motif of the reconciliation of nature and culture could be seen as a variant on the Camusian theme of the marriage of man and the earth.¹⁰ Camus, standing in the wind among the Roman ruins of Tipasa, dreams of abolishing the distance between man and the world. As he walks, with his friends, along the path that leads them through the ruins to the cliffs above the Mediterranean sea, he feels that 'for the last time we are spectators' (Camus 1965: 56, my translation). The world around him transforms: 'in this wedding of ruins and spring, the ruins have become stones once again and, having lost the sheen imposed on them by man, they have returned to nature' (56). For Camus this reconciliation of man and nature often takes on an erotic aspect (the descriptions, in *The Outsider*, of Meursault and Marie swimming in the sea are in this respect telling). For Lévi-Strauss it is more a *fraternal* reconciliation. It is expressed through the figure of a 'truce' between man and nature, a halting of the frantic march of civilisation. The ordinary relationships of human beings to nature are replaced by a state of symbiosis, similar to the one described in a passage of *Tristes Tropiques* in which Lévi-Strauss recalls a canoe trip along the Rio Pimenta Buena. The river, its multiple tributaries and the forest are so entangled that it becomes impossible to know which is upholding the other. In this vision of nature in which 'the ordinary distinctions between earth and water' (1963b: 323; 1955a: 393) have been abolished, what is substituted in place of man's

¹⁰ I am grateful to Claude Lévi-Strauss for pointing out to me that he had already engaged with this theme in 1938 in the unpublished play that he started to write whilst still among the Nambikwara. See 1963b: 378–9; 1955a: 438, 455–6.

ordinary relationship to nature is '[a] friendship between the elements [which] extended to living creatures' (1963b: 323; 1955a: 393).

The figure of the reconciliation of nature and culture is paired up, in Lévi-Strauss's works, with its opposite. It is the flip-side of the intuition that nature and culture have been irrevocably separated and belong to realms between which it is no longer possible – except fleetingly (the 'denser form of intelligibility' attained during the Languedoc walk is only momentary) – to bridge. Contradiction is at the heart of the human predicament. What drives the human quest to understand the world is a desire to apprehend our relationship to the world as being *continuous* – to apprehend human beings and nature as being part of the same intelligible whole. Or, at least, this is what an analysis of the 'totalising function' teaches us (it is also one of the lessons that Lévi-Strauss learns from Amerindian mythology). However, the inevitable conclusion that Lévi-Strauss draws from his many experiences and investigations is that his relationship to the world is, in reality, *discontinuous*, in the sense that human thought (the symbolic order) and the world have no real ('natural') correspondence, or at least none that we can directly experience (the tying together of nature and culture occurs behind our backs, he comments in *The Savage Mind*). This is something that Camus expressed succinctly in *The Myth of Sisyphus* when he wrote that 'All thought is anthropomorphic' (1955: 21), and that Lévi-Strauss formulated in a slightly different way (he adds a historical perspective to Camus's insight) in the concluding section of *Tristes Tropiques* when he wrote: 'As for the creations of the human mind, they are meaningful only in relation to that mind and will fall into nothingness as soon as it ceases to exist' (1963b: 397; 1955a: 496).¹¹

The idea of a fundamental *discontinuity* between human beings and the world is implicitly contained in the theory of the birth of language – i.e. of the passage from nature to culture – that Lévi-Strauss develops in his 'Introduction à l'œuvre de Marcel Mauss' (I have already discussed this theory from a different point of view in the Introduction). Language, Lévi-Strauss argues, could only have been born in one go – 'd'un seul coup' (1987a: 60; 1950a: XLVII). In other words, the birth of language brought about an instantaneous passage from a state where nothing had meaning, to another, where everything did. Once in possession of language, the world started to signify for humanity, and everything, potentially, had meaning. However, the world was 'none the better *known* for being so'. Indeed, according to Lévi-Strauss, although the transformation that gave

¹¹ See also the 'Finale' of *The Naked Man*.

birth to a world that signifies – and hence gave birth to culture – happened ‘instantaneously’, the process of discovering *what* the world signifies was, and continues to be, a slow and partial process. As Lévi-Strauss puts it, the birth of language put humans in possession of a map to the domain they inhabited, but no key to determine which part of the map corresponds with which part of the domain. As a result, Lévi-Strauss’s argument continues, human beings are always confronted with a ‘surplus’ of signifiers, which they are unable to allocate, or have not yet allocated to signifieds (parts of the map that have not been matched up with parts of the domain). Human beings are always confronted with a surplus of *empty* signifiers.

There are doubtless many ways of interpreting this theory of the origin of language. We will retain the following one: the birth of language is, at once, the event that makes possible a specifically human mode of apprehending the world – for us, unlike for a stone, the world signifies – and the event that condemns us to always remaining ‘outside’ of the world, of doing no more than anthropomorphically projecting meaning upon it, to reuse Camus’s expression. Between the symbolic order that is the domain of human beings and that of nature, there is a fundamental discontinuity, which explains why there will always be a ‘non-equivalence’ – in French: ‘inadéquation’ – (1987a: 62; 1950a: XLIX) between the order of the signifier and that of the signified.

The ‘tragic’ story that one may read into Lévi-Strauss’s works may be summed up as follows: in the course of the passage from nature to culture, from a state where ‘nothing had a meaning’ to one where ‘everything had meaning’ (1987a: 60; 1950a: XLVII), ‘nature’ is lost. The advent of a specifically human mode of apprehending the world (through the advent of a symbolic order) brings about man’s divorce from the world, the divorce of the realm of human thought and culture from that of ‘things’. The passage from nature to culture constitutes an expulsion of humankind from the sensible world – or at least, this is how the talking animals that we are perceive our condition sometimes. As a result, we live in the symbolic order (language) in an exile (Camus comes to mind again here).

This is one of the conclusions that Lévi-Strauss reaches in the course of his meditation on Buddhism in *Tristes Tropiques*, where he gives a very different account of what understanding is, in comparison to that which is developed in the geological allegory outlined above. He writes here, summarising one of the insights of Buddhism but also taking on this insight as his own: ‘This great religion of not-knowingness is not based upon our incapacity to understand. It bears witness, rather, to our natural gifts, raising us to the point at which we discover truth in the guise of the

mutual exclusiveness of being and knowing' (1963b: 395; 1955a: 493). Or, as Camus puts it in *Noces*: 'In this place, I know that I will never be able to be close enough to the world. I must be naked and then dive into the sea' (1965: 57, my translation).

In opposition to this intuition of a fundamental discontinuity between humanity and the world, nature and culture, Lévi-Strauss formulates the myth of a reconciliation of nature and culture – a myth of cosmic nuptials – which, in *The Way of the Masks* is expressed metaphorically, as we have seen, in the figure of the learning of the secret language of animals (= nature). One may apply Lévi-Strauss's own method of interpreting myth to interpret this fragment of a Lévi-Straussian myth and the specific form it has taken. For the story that Lévi-Strauss is telling here is none other than an inversion of the myth of Babel. The latter is a story situated at the start of time (after the Deluge) that describes the advent of discord on earth through the differentiation of human languages; the former is a story situated at the end of time (history) that describes the advent of concord on earth through the reunification of human and animal languages. In the first case, a disjunction is at the origin of the passage from unity to diversity; in the other, a conjunction is at the origin of the passage from diversity to unity – the latter constituting the creation of a 'totality' in the sense of the term defined by Kant and quoted in the introduction to this chapter.

No longer *outside* nature, no longer separated from nature by the symbol, the animal kingdom speaks to human beings a language that they understand and that is their own too. It is as an expression of this figure of reconciliation, I would like to suggest, that we should interpret the famous last lines of *Tristes Tropiques*. They constitute a counter-point to the pessimistic conclusions arrived at in his meditations on Buddhism. Lévi-Strauss concludes with the evocation of a profound identification between humanity and the world, which he attains, 'beyond thought and beneath society', in 'an essence that may be vouchsafed to us in a mineral more beautiful than any work of Man; in the scent, more subtly evolved than our books, that lingers in the heart of a lily; or in the wink of an eye, heavy with patience, serenity, and mutual forgiveness, that sometimes, through an involuntary understanding, one can exchange with a cat' (1963b: 398; 1955a: 497).

Art and the logic of sensible qualities

To understand Lévi-Strauss's works fully, we need to read them with an eye for the concealed lateral connections that link their different facets, the anthropological and the aesthetic, the philosophical and the poetic, the theoretical and the literary. In the preceding chapter I have shown that Lévi-Strauss's understanding of the nature of aesthetic perception and creation is intimately related to his understanding of the modes of functioning of what he calls *pensée sauvage* – a 'wild' mode of thought common to all human beings, whether 'primitive' or not. Although he does not say so explicitly himself, Lévi-Strauss construes art as emerging from the same elemental 'totalising function' – an expression of the human impulse to impose order upon chaos – as the various other products of *pensée sauvage*, such as myth, ritual, classification and totemism. In this connection, I argued that Lévi-Strauss saw art as one of several 'offspring' of 'wild' thinking and hence as being genealogically related to the others, with whom it shares certain 'family resemblances', among them the drive to fulfil the 'totalising function', although the 'totalities' produced by 'wild' thinking are never complete and are in perpetual readjustment. In this chapter, I will continue to explore the interconnections that link Lévi-Strauss's anthropological theories and his aesthetic theories around the concept of *pensée sauvage*, a connection that is fundamental to Lévi-Strauss's system of thought. I will be concerned here, more specifically, with the second distinctive feature by which one may identify art as a member of the family of 'wild' modes of thought, namely its rooting in a 'logic of sensory perception' or 'concrete logic'.

What is this logic? How does it work?¹ And, above all, in what sense is it inherent to art? To answer these questions, one needs to examine first more

¹ For a philosophical discussion of the dynamic that interrelates structure and event in the functioning of *pensée sauvage* see Keck 2004a. Keck shows that classificatory systems, as theorised by Lévi-Strauss, are not fixed and centred systems, but totalities that are constantly being rearranged as the result of the decentring effect of events.

closely the anthropological argument of *The Savage Mind*. I will pick up the thread of Lévi-Strauss's aesthetic ideas as and when they start to connect with the main strand of his anthropological argument.

'PRIMITIVE' SCIENCE AND AESTHETICS

The Savage Mind is a book about the relationship between different modes of thought: 'primitive' and 'civilised'; 'magical' and 'scientific'; 'mythical' and 'logical'; 'wild' and 'domesticated'. One of its fundamental aims is to question the terms in which these different modes of thought have traditionally been opposed by anthropologists and Western philosophy in general. It constitutes, in this respect, a rehabilitation of so-called 'wild' modes of thought and their heuristic, explanatory and creative value. As we shall see, this rehabilitation involves, at its very core, a refiguring of the relationship, established by Western thought, between sensory perception and intellectual understanding that has fundamental implications not only for anthropology but also for aesthetics. *The Savage Mind* sets out to counter a number of commonly held beliefs about what in the early part of the twentieth century used to be called 'primitive mentality', an expression made popular by the then influential French philosopher and sociologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939). Against Lévy-Bruhl and his followers, Lévi-Strauss argued that 'primitive' or 'wild' modes of thought are neither radically different – pre-logical, pre-rational – nor fundamentally more archaic than our own 'civilised' ways of thinking. Against Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), one of the great pioneers of Anglo-American anthropology, Lévi-Strauss further argued that knowledge acquired by 'primitive' societies about the natural world is not primarily determined by the basic needs of life (one of the principal tenets of Malinowski's functionalist and utilitarian conception of culture), but is essentially disinterested, i.e. acquired in and for itself. Alluding to a comment by Malinowski to the effect that the botanical knowledge of 'primitive' societies is determined by the rumbling of stomachs, Lévi-Strauss famously remarked that plant species are not only 'bonnes à manger' – good to eat – but 'bonnes à penser' – good to think with. As we shall see, understanding how and why this is the case is to get at the very core of what Lévi-Strauss means by 'concrete logic'.

Lévi-Strauss replaces the geographically and culturally bound notion of a 'primitive mentality' with that of a *universal* 'wild' mode of thought. The expression *pensée sauvage* is based on a pun: a 'pensée' in French is both a 'thought' and a kind of wild flower, the *Viola tricolor* (a pansy). 'La pensée sauvage' is therefore a 'wild' mode of thought in the botanical sense of the term 'wild' – it is thinking in a 'state of nature'. He opposes this mode of

thought to 'domesticated' thinking, the specialised mode of thought developed by large-scale ('hot') societies for the purposes of productivity. Unlike 'wild' thinking – primarily a classificatory mode of thought – 'domesticated' thought is by nature instrumental: its function is to change man's relationship to his environment. As Marcel Hénaff has pointed out, its development is linked to one of the defining projects of modernity: the mastery of nature. 'Wild' modes of thought, on the contrary, strive to maintain a state of equilibrium between humans and nature.

Although the *products* of these two types of thought may indeed be very different, 'wild' thinking is by no means inferior to domesticated thinking, in the sense that it is no less coherent or methodical. It draws on the same basic mental operations as 'domesticated' thought. Thus, for Lévi-Strauss, the emergence of 'domesticated' thought does not imply a fundamental transformation in the *way* in which we think. On the contrary, one of the premises of structural anthropology is that, as Lévi-Strauss puts it, 'man has always been thinking equally well' (1963a: 230; 1958: 255).

For Lévi-Strauss – this is one of the key propositions put forward in *The Savage Mind* – what differentiates so-called 'primitive' modes of thought from 'modern' scientific modes of thought is not the types of mental operations that they presuppose, or the methods of observation that they draw on, but *the level at which they approach sensible reality*. And it is here that Lévi-Strauss's anthropological ideas start to have aesthetic ramifications. For 'primitive' thought, as for modern science, the universe is indeed 'an object of thought' (1966b: 3; 1962b: 13); what differs is the level at which the universe is apprehended: in the case of modern science ('domesticated' thought), it is apprehended at the level of concealed properties (i.e. its constitutive 'essence' or form), in the case of 'primitive' science ('wild' thought), that of perceived appearances, i.e. sense perception.

Lévi-Strauss's explanation of what he calls the 'Neolithic paradox' will help us understand better the nature of this distinction, which is fundamental to the anthropological argument of *The Savage Mind* and, as we shall see, its aesthetic sub-text. The Neolithic was a period of unparalleled human progress during which humanity developed some of the fundamental arts and crafts of civilisation, such as pottery, weaving, agriculture and the domestication of animals. The question that Lévi-Strauss asks in *The Savage Mind* is not, as one might expect, why this revolution occurred, but why it appears to have come to a halt. Indeed, according to Lévi-Strauss's version of human evolution, this great period of technological development was followed by what he presents as several millennia of 'stagnation'. It was not until the emergence of modern

science during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that significant new technological and scientific progress began to occur. It is this halt in technological and scientific development – as if scientific invention, with the Neolithic, had reached a glass ceiling – that Lévi-Strauss sees as a ‘paradox’.² And he solves this ‘paradox’ as follows:

There is only one solution to the paradox, namely, that there are two distinct modes of scientific thought. These are certainly not a function of different stages of development of the human mind but rather of two strategic levels at which nature is accessible to scientific enquiry: one roughly adapted to that of perception and the imagination: the other at a remove from it. It is as if the necessary connections which are the object of all science, Neolithic or modern, could be arrived at by two different routes, one very close to, and the other more remote from, sensible intuition. (1966b: 15; 1962b: 28)

Lévi-Strauss defines here the two paths that are capable of leading humankind to the discovery of the necessary relations that form the object of scientific inquiry. The first, that of ‘wild’ thought, goes via sensory perception – it is the path of ‘sensible intuition’ and also, significantly, that of ‘the imagination’. What defines its specific point of view is that its relationship to the natural world (sensible reality) is ‘immediate’. The second path, that of ‘domesticated’ thought, is a more ‘distant’ path, one that is ‘décalé’ – out of alignment – in relation to the first, by which one may infer that Lévi-Strauss means that it resorts to a plane of abstract formalisation (goes ‘via the concept’), although this is not something that Lévi-Strauss says explicitly himself.³

The veiled aesthetic proposition that is contained in *The Savage Mind* and reaffirmed in numerous asides and digressions in subsequent works is

² Of course scientific and/or technological evolution did not stop after the Neolithic. The development of metal tools, the invention of writing, the development of irrigation and that of monetary economies were all ulterior developments. Elsewhere in his works, Lévi-Strauss has attenuated the claim that underpins the hypothesis of the ‘Neolithic paradox’, suggesting that what happens after the Neolithic and up to the birth of ‘modern’ (i.e. post-Cartesian) science is an accumulation of the *same kind* of developments as those perfected during the Neolithic. The modern period marks a qualitative shift in the nature of scientific invention. My aim here is not to enter the intricacies of this debate, which lies beyond the scope of this book. What is of interest here is the symbolic importance of the Neolithic in Lévi-Strauss’s system of thought in general. As we have already seen, Lévi-Strauss says that he has a ‘Neolithic intelligence’. In *Tristes Tropiques*, following Rousseau, he identifies the Neolithic as a Golden Age. In the Lévi-Straussian scheme of things, it is after the Neolithic that the course of history starts to go wrong. For a detailed discussion of Lévi-Strauss’s ‘catastrophic’ conception of history, see Johnson 2004b.

³ One might say that the specificity of ‘domesticated’ thought resides in its reflexivity (Ricoeur 1974: 33). It formalises the operations that ‘wild’ thinking and art simply perform. The distinction, however, is not absolute. Classical logic enabled one kind of reflexivity but other, more intuitive, forms of reflexivity are also possible.

that art is the inheritor of this archaic mode of scientific enquiry, whose particularity resides in the *immediacy* of its relationship to the sensible world. Said differently, the domain of art, like that of 'primitive' science, is that of a 'logic of sensation'. This is indeed what emerges indirectly from his writings about art, such as his study of Northwest Coast masks (1982), his reading of Baudelaire's 'Les chats' (1962d), and of Apollinaire's 'Les colchiques' (1987b: 210–18; 1983: 291–300), or his interpretations of Poussin's 'Et in Arcadia Ego' and 'Eliezer and Rebecca' (1997; 1993a). And it is what explains that his attempt to understand this logic in the anthropological part of his works so often appears to be concerned, at a deeper level, with aesthetic problems.

Let us spell out how this 'primitive' science, rooted entirely in a sensory experience of the world, works. Lévi-Strauss's argument is that it constructs hypotheses and makes deductions about the properties of things on the basis of the observation of what seventeenth-century philosophers called their 'secondary qualities', in fact, those qualities of an object that are perceived first, such as colours, odours, tastes, textures, etc. Although 'primitive' science may not understand how the secondary qualities of any given object, such as the bitterness of almonds, are related to its primary or 'essential' properties (molecular make-up), as does modern science, the gamble that there is a relationship between the two, for example that bitterness 'signifies' toxicity (chemistry teaches us the almonds contain cyanide), in practice pays off, and enables the constitution of a form of speculative science. This way of making inferences about the properties of things on the basis of their sensible appearance is what Lévi-Strauss terms a 'droit de suite', the basis of a 'wild' science. What is significant about this model of 'wild' thinking in the present context – I shall return to this later in more detail – lies in its prefiguration of aesthetic experience: the observation of sensible properties (or, more accurately, the relationship between these properties) provides a direct means of access to an intelligible order and a 'necessity'. Art, like so-called 'primitive' science, treats colours, shapes, textures, as being intelligible as well as merely sensible – they are treated as the elements of a code, even if what the code signifies is ultimately unknowable to sensory intuition alone.

Let us examine more closely the historical argument about the genealogy of art that is contained in *The Savage Mind*. It provides a crucial key to Lévi-Strauss's understanding of the interpretative act. This historical narrative is not easy to detect at a primary level of reading. It is a buried part of the book, only referred to in a small number of asides and allusions, but nevertheless one that sheds much light on the complicated interrelation between aesthetics and anthropology that underlies Lévi-Strauss's thought.

THE GENEALOGY OF ART: TWO PATHS

The story of the history of human thought contained in *The Savage Mind* – which is also the story of the genealogy of art or ‘aesthetic thought’ – may be summarised as follows. Up to and including the Neolithic, human civilisation developed on the basis of a mode of thought rooted entirely in a logic of sensory perception. This logic was the basis for a ‘science of the concrete’. With the Greeks and the birth of reason (i.e. abstract thought) there occurred a fundamental bifurcation in human thinking whereby humanity discovered another mode of access to the necessary relations previously grasped, by concrete science, at the level of a sensory experience of the world alone. From this point onwards, two paths were open to human thought, the older path travelled by the Neolithic scientist and his/her ancestors in the Mesolithic and Palaeolithic and the new path opened by the Greek philosophers when they invented a purely conceptual (theoretical) mode of thought that cut its ties with sensation. (Lévi-Strauss’s model for this ‘new’ mode of thought is mathematics, about which he writes elsewhere that it consists in ‘structures in a pure state, free from any embodiment’ (1981: 647; 1971a: 578), i.e. mental structures divorced from any sensible basis). Lévi-Strauss sees this bifurcation as a necessary precondition to the development of modern science (although the actual occurrence of this bifurcation – and the civilisation to which it gave rise – he sees as a historical accident). The new path taken by the Greeks is the path that will eventually lead to modern science, presumably (Lévi-Strauss does not spell this out) because Greek logic made possible the kind of formalisation that is the basis of modern scientific thought.

In the course of its development towards a fully scientific status, in the modern sense of the term ‘scientific’, this split-off part of ‘concrete logic’ grew increasingly distant from the ‘concrete’ modes of thought out of which it emerged and which, Lévi-Strauss argues, contained it in germinal form. The emergence of the ‘domesticated’ modes of thought that would eventually lead to modern science required that humanity turned its back on the domain of sense perception and the insights made possible by an exploration of reality wholly and solely at the level of secondary qualities. The price that we have had to pay for this ‘intellectual divide’ (1981: 636; 1971a: 569) is our blindness to the value of these more archaic modes of understanding based on sensation.

The value of art, for Lévi-Strauss, is similar to that of myths and ritual: it preserves the evidence – although in fragmented form – of this archaic mode of thought. Through the analysis of the deep structures that are

contained in art, as well as myth and ritual, Lévi-Strauss is able to re-establish a continuity with the 'wild' modes of thought that were prevalent during the Neolithic, but which were suppressed by the rise of 'domesticated' thought (1966b: 219; 1962b: 262).⁴ For Lévi-Strauss, the act of structurally interpreting a work of art, or indeed a myth or ritual, thus has a fundamentally *reparatory* function. It constitutes an attempt at *reconciling* wild and domesticated thought, sensation and abstract theorisation.

The contradiction inherent in the evolution of the West since the Greeks is that it has generated at the same time more order, in particular social order, and more disorder. There is an entropic principle at work in historical evolution – history construed as progress – that increases in proportion with the pace of evolution. Lévi-Strauss views anthropology, which he proposes to rewrite in French 'entropologie', as the study of the effects of the disaggregation and destruction of human societies brought about by the process of historical 'evolution'. The value of art, along with myth, ritual and the other products of 'wild' thinking, resides in their relative resistance to the entropic dispersal that characterises the historic process for Lévi-Strauss.

This is expressed in a brief but important aside contained in the concluding section of *The Savage Mind*. As he explains here, in the large-scale societies in which we live, 'wild' modes of thought are constantly being threatened – like an endangered species – by 'domesticated' thought, although in principle they should be able to co-habit, in the way that wild and domesticated plants do. Art, in this respect, plays a key 'conservational' role: 'Whether one deplores or rejoices in the fact, there are still zones in which [wild] thought, like [wild] species, is relatively protected. This is the case of art, to which our civilization accords the status of a national park, with all the advantages and inconveniences attending so artificial a formula' (1966b: 219; 1962b: 263).⁵ In this connection, one might see the relative autonomisation of the field of art in 'hot' societies, symbolised by the invention of the museum, as a process analogous to metempsychosis – it is the result of the transmigration of the soul of 'wild'

⁴ Lévi-Strauss's rejection of abstract art is no doubt in part motivated by his belief that it has turned its back on the sensible, cut off its ties with concrete logic. Why this is a misrepresentation of abstraction is what I will discuss in chapter 4.

⁵ I have amended this translation which fails to grasp the sense in which Lévi-Strauss is using the word 'sauvage'. In *A View from Afar* Lévi-Strauss writes: 'Thus, myths concern the psychologist and the philosopher as well as the anthropologist: they constitute an area among others (for we should not forget art) where the mind, relatively free of external constraints, still musters a native activity that we can observe in all its freshness and spontaneity' (1987b: 174; 1983: 236).

modes of thought, after their 'death' at the hands of 'domesticated' thought, into the body of art.

The advent of what Lévi-Strauss calls 'the Greek miracle', i.e. the invention of logic, is 'catastrophic', one may surmise, because it separates 'wild' and 'domesticated' thought. It constitutes a specialisation of human thinking, in which its 'primitive' unity – that of its logical and aesthetic modes of operating – is lost. And this is perhaps one of the keys to why Lévi-Strauss, after Rousseau, sees the Neolithic as the closest approximation to a Golden Age (or 'mythic age') that humanity has known (1963b: 511–15; 1955a: 467–71). It corresponds to a state of civilisation in which 'wild' and 'domesticated' thought are still one, and the domain of the aesthetic is still an integral part of lived culture, as opposed to belonging to the relatively autonomous and separate domain of 'art'. Lévi-Strauss's excavation of the deep structures or schemas contained in art and myth may be seen in this context as an attempt to grasp a state in the evolution of human thought that precedes the split between 'wild' and 'domesticated' thought and the decline of the former. And what these excavations bring to light is that the later 'domesticated' modes of thought *were already contained in their earlier 'wild' progenitors*. The underlying function of the act of interpretation for Lévi-Strauss – its *ethical* function, one might say – is to challenge the linear conception of the evolution of human thought that presents 'wild', i.e. 'concrete', thinking as pre-scientific, as an earlier stage in the development of human thought, as prior to abstract (logocentric) thinking. For Lévi-Strauss, on the contrary, the later mode of thought already exists, fully formed, in its 'wild' antecedent. When Lévi-Strauss was accused of using the analytical tools of domesticated thought, in particular mathematics, to analyse the structure of mythical thought, i.e. 'wild' thought, Lévi-Strauss retorted that the mathematical formalisation of mythical structures revealed to him that there is already a geometry and an algebra contained in the mythical images deployed by Amerindian thought. Here, mythical references to different ways of preparing food and to the utensils particular to each are the means of signifying logical oppositions such as empty/full, included/excluded, container/contained, internal/external, and, through their manipulation, of elaborating an elementary theory of geometrical forms (1973b: 472; 1966a: 406).

PHILOSOPHICAL AESTHETICS: THE LÉVI-STRAUSSIAN TWIST

To understand properly *The Savage Mind*, one needs to view it in the context of the history of aesthetic thought, which in many ways is that of

the relation between two kinds of knowledge: conceptual-abstract and sensual-imaginative. One may usefully turn, here, to Marc Jimenez's recent account of this history in *Qu'est-ce que l'esthétique?* (1997).

Jimenez distinguishes, as is common in contemporary French philosophical aesthetics, between the philosophy of art, whose origins may be traced to classical antiquity, and aesthetics, which constitutes a relatively new invention, in particular construed as a relatively autonomous branch of philosophy. As Jimenez shows, aesthetics, in the modern sense of the term, emerged during the eighteenth century as a by-product of the opening up of the field of sensation to philosophical inquiry. The science of aesthetics that the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten proposed in his *Aesthetica* – he was the first to use the term aesthetic in a modern sense – was not *primarily* about art or beauty but construed as a 'science of sensuous cognition' which he further glossed as 'the theory of the fine arts, the theory of the inferior kind of knowledge, the art of thinking beautifully, the art of analogical thinking' (as cited Gross 2002: 411). Questions relating to what we would today call 'aesthetic objects' arose as a part of the more general inquiry – one that was to be fundamental to the eighteenth century as a whole – into sensation as a source of knowledge, albeit 'inferior' knowledge. Although the philosophical discourse on art and beauty may be traced to such early works as Aristotle's *Poetics* or Plato's *Banquet*, for there to be an aesthetics required a science of sensory cognition, in other words a science of how we come to 'know' the world through the senses. And indeed, it was in the direction of an exploration of sensuous cognition that Kant pursued Baumgarten's aesthetic project, although taking it in a very different direction. Kant's analysis of judgements of taste rests on a broader theory about the interaction of the faculties in the constitution of a knowable world. With Kant, human experience is confined to a realm of appearances, a phenomenal world co-produced by the mind, the latter's role being to weave together sensations and to filter all knowable things through categorical frameworks that are the a priori conditions of experience. The key to judgements of taste is thus sought out in the mind's special way of weaving together sensations when confronted with a beautiful object. Summarising his conception of the emergence of aesthetics, Jimenez writes: 'To recognise aesthetics as a discipline in its own right does indeed testify to the existence of a particular domain of study linked to sensibility that has obtained the right to exist alongside other sciences. Like them, it contributes to our understanding and to the advancement of knowledge' (Jimenez 1997: 93, my translation).

Western thought since the Greeks has associated the pursuit of truth and the acquisition of knowledge with reasoning, in other words with conceptual-abstract thinking. It is through the exercise of the logical parts of our minds that we are meant to gain access to the laws and principles that are the basis of the pursuit of knowledge. Within such a scheme of things, the testimony of the senses, the realm of intuition and the imagination, is construed at best as the source of an 'inferior' form of understanding ('confused' or 'dark' perceptions in the vocabulary of Leibnitz and Wolff), more frequently as a hindrance to the exercise of the 'higher' cognitive faculties or rational reasoning.

Philosophical aesthetics therefore emerged, in part at least, as an attempt to theorise a specifically sensuous form of knowledge, that is distinct from yet equal to its rational 'other'. Jimenez equates the history of aesthetics with that of the emancipation of sensuous cognition from the domination of rationality. Explicitly rejecting the idea of a history of aesthetics that would be a chronological account of aesthetic doctrines, he defines such a history as: 'the history of sensibility, the imagination and of those discourses that have tried to highlight sensory modes of understanding . . . as a counterpoint to the privilege granted by Western civilisations to rational modes of understanding' (Jimenez 1997: 26, my translation). Emphasising the importance of the vast movement of autonomisation that underpins this history, Jimenez comments: 'aesthetics – construed as a science or a philosophy – can only be defined in the distance that separates reason from that which is not reason' (1997: 76, my translation).

The process of aesthetic autonomisation described by Jimenez is a long and complex one, working at many different levels, and ambiguous in its outcomes (no art form can in fact exist in a totally self-contained, independent sphere). Its culmination, during the age of Enlightenment, in the institution of a new branch of philosophical inquiry, is but a part of broader changes affecting the nature of artistic creation and perception from the Renaissance onwards. Among the main, one may cite the gradual conversion of the medieval artisan, who owed his creative powers entirely to God, into the Renaissance artist, who started to proclaim, for the first time, the autonomy of the creating subject, although this autonomy was far from total since the essential function of art during the Renaissance, the imitation of nature, was still bound up with the theological imperative of glorifying God's work. Jimenez argues convincingly that the gradual emancipation of sensation from reason is to be understood against the background of these broader changes. They prepared the way for a theorisation of man's relation to art and beauty in terms of a subjective

experience, the very basis of philosophical aesthetics. In this connection, the shift in aesthetic values that occurred between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is particularly important. The aesthetic doctrine of classicism, which dominated the seventeenth century, depended on a timeless and universal ideal of beauty that may be grasped a priori, independently from any reference to a perceiving subject. The seventeenth century, following the Greeks, believed that it was possible to understand beauty 'in itself'. And it held that artists could attain this ideal by observing rules that were essentially rational, even mathematical. In other words, during the seventeenth century the domain of sensibility was still very much under the tutelage of Reason. By contrast, during the eighteenth century a very different conception of beauty started to come to the fore, one that is captured in the notion of the sublime, a *force* that, in Joshua Reynolds' words, 'so overpowers, and takes possession of the whole mind, that no room is left for attention to minute criticism'. Jimenez sums up the key transformation that occurs with the eighteenth century as follows: 'The reference point is no longer sought in a set of supposedly ideal rules, but in what the individual feels in the course of his dynamic confrontation with the object' (Jimenez 1997: 79, my translation). Aesthetics, as defined by Jimenez, is precisely the discourse that attempts to grasp and understand this 'dynamic confrontation'. The conflict that, in the seventeenth century, opposed a rationally conceived classical aesthetic to a sensualist one already turned towards Romanticism is encapsulated in the famous debate that took place in the Académie in the 1670s about whether drawing in painting is more important than colour. Taking example from Poussin, the purest embodiment of the classical spirit, Charles Le Brun (1619–90), the *Premier Peintre du roi*, argued the case for drawing. One of the key arguments that he put forward to confound Gabriel Blanchard, a member of the 'colourist' camp and defender of Rubens, was that 'the role of colour is exclusively to satisfy the eye, unlike design, which satisfies the intellect' (Le Brun 2000: 184). The reversal of this aesthetic hierarchy over the following two centuries is made apparent if one is to place side by side with Le Brun's judgement on painting another formulated by Paul Valéry, at the start of the twentieth century: 'in art, it is seeing alone that must bring about pleasure, and, if there is some idea to suggest, the eye must lead to it through its perceptions. A painter should always imagine painting for someone who does not possess the faculty of language' (1998a: 215–18). By the time Valéry expressed his aesthetic views, sense perception had become the basis of an authentic and autonomous mode of understanding.

In contradistinction to the dualistic scheme that characterised the Académie's view of painting in the seventeenth century, Enlightenment thinking sought out a new synthesis of reason and perception and their respective visual representatives, line and colour. The fundamental question asked by the founders of modern aesthetics was, in Jimenez's paraphrase of it: 'What proves that the choice of colours which Le Brun claims to be arbitrary or subject to the painter's whims doesn't obey a special logic, that it is not "rationally founded"?' (Jimenez 1997 : 78, my translation). Further elucidating the new approach that was to define the orientation of Enlightenment aesthetics from Baumgarten to Kant, Jimenez pursues: 'The common ground was to be found in another form of reason, different from that at work in mathematics or logic and adapted to its new object. It was characterised as an aesthetic or poetic reason and was presented as an intermediary between rationality proper and the imagination, between the understanding and sensibility' (78).

A close reading of *The Savage Mind* reveals that it is deeply rooted in the set of concerns that gave rise to philosophical aesthetics and the transformations in the history of ideas that, as Jimenez shows, made such a discipline possible. In many ways, Lévi-Strauss's theory of a 'wild' mode of thought constitutes his own attempt at grasping Jimenez's 'aesthetic or poetic reason', a form of 'reason' that Lévi-Strauss shows is at work not only in art but in the very production of culture itself. However, crucially, Lévi-Strauss does not see an incompatibility between the functioning of an 'aesthetic rationality' and the rationality that is characteristic of mathematics or formal logic. And it is in this twist that the originality of Lévi-Strauss's solution to the problem of the relation between sensuous-imaginative thinking and abstract-conceptual thinking lies, its originality for anthropology and for aesthetics.

Western thought says that on the one hand there is reason, on the other sensation. The philosophers of the Enlightenment, according to Jimenez, tried to find a third way between sensation and reasoning, another kind of rationality. Lévi-Strauss's innovation is to say that there is a logic of sensible qualities, and it is this logic that he places at the heart of the mechanisms of cultural creation in general and aesthetic creation in particular. Lévi-Strauss roots logic *directly in* sensation and indeed the sensible, i.e. nature itself. Structuralism is a form of empiricism. Lévi-Strauss reveals the fundamental and constitutive imbrication of sense perception and rational understanding at the most elemental levels of our relation to the world that surrounds us. He does so in the anthropological part of his work in his theorisation of the conditions of possibility of a 'primitive science' based

on an intuitive form of understanding, itself rooted wholly in the experiences of sense perception. He does so in the general theory of cultural production that he puts forward in *The Savage Mind*. And he does so, as we shall see, in the many digressions and asides that explore the implications of the existence of a *logic of sensible qualities* for an understanding of aesthetic creation and perception. By treating the logic at the core of abstract-conceptual thought as a more or less direct translation of sensory experiences, Lévi-Strauss finds a new basis for a theory of sensuous cognition, Baumgarten's original goal, and, in the process, a key to the language of art, a language that one can extract, as it were, ready formed from perceived reality. Structural anthropology discovers in sensation a gateway to a concealed logic that is immanent to the sensible, a *logic of the concrete*, an expression to which we can now give its full meaning.⁶

It is arguably philosopher Claude Imbert, author of *Pour une histoire de la logique* (1999) and *Maurice Merleau-Ponty* (2005), who has brought to light with the greatest acuity the importance of this anthropological insight. In this connection, two of her articles deserve special attention: 'Qualia' (Imbert 2004) and 'Philosophie, anthropologie: la fin d'un mal-entendu' (Imbert 2000). The term *qualia*, the plural of the Latin *quale*, denotes sensible qualities such as they are subjectively apprehended – the way an apple tastes or a particular colour looks, for example. In this essay she refers to Lévi-Strauss as the inventor of a 'nouveau contrat de réalité' (Imbert 2004: 433). She explains: 'without renouncing mathematical models, Lévi-Strauss has sought out an alternative logic, capable of a making sense of ethnographic and other kinds of data' (2004: 404, my translation). The earlier of the two essays emphasises the foundational nature of this alternative logic, this *adherent* logic, as she calls it, that underpins and predates all our other ties to the world: 'The first moments of objectivity and consciousness, the adherent but no less shared mode of symbolisation that all other modes of symbolisation presuppose, are qualitative ... the

⁶ The development of Lévi-Strauss's works may be seen, on one level at least, as a journey to the heart of concrete logic. *The Savage Mind* constitutes, in this connection, Lévi-Strauss's first systematic attempt to describe the nature and function of this logic and construct a general theory of culture on its basis. However, as we shall see in chapter 4, the existence of such a logic was intuited much earlier, and can ultimately be traced to sensory shocks provided by Lévi-Strauss's first trips to the New World in the 1930s (see *Tristes Tropiques*). Having intuited the existence of a concrete logic in his early works, Lévi-Strauss devoted much of the remainder of his anthropological studies, in particular his studies of Amerindian myths, to trying to understand exactly how it works, i.e. to writing its 'grammar'. The *Mythologiques* thus excavates, in turn, a logic of sensible qualities proper (*The Raw and the Cooked*), a more complex logic of forms (*From Honey to Ashes*) and finally a logic of temporal intervals (*The Origin of Table Manners*).

first geometries are qualities of forms' (Imbert 2000: 234). The Lévi-Straussian concept of structure, Imbert points out, reunites the qualitative and quantitative at the very root of what makes us human and producers of symbolic systems. As Lévi-Strauss puts it in his important essay on Propp (it is this formula that Imbert may be seen to be echoing in the preceding quotation): 'Structure has no distinct content; it is content itself, apprehended in a logical organization conceived *as a property of the real*' (1978b: 115; 1973a: 139, my italics). It is this epistemological shift, identified by Imbert, whereby a logic is discovered not exactly *in* the qualitative dimension of reality (it is not *extracted*, as in traditional empiricist theories), but inscribed *on* it, that lies at the heart of the theory of culture put forward by Lévi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* and, by extension, of his formulation of a distinctive structural aesthetic. Within this new perspective, sensuous cognition no longer stands in opposition to rationality, aesthetic perception to logic, art to science. There is indeed a 'mathematics of man', to borrow the title of one of Lévi-Strauss's essays (1955b), one that is entirely compatible with an understanding of aesthetic creation and perception. As Lévi-Strauss comments in the 'Finale' of *The Naked Man*, the refusal to grant the intellect – specifically in its mathematical and logical modes of operating – its proper role in art is attributable to a long-lived mysticism that seeks to bury the core mechanisms of creation in the realm of the ineffable.⁷

One may imagine that Lévi-Strauss's contribution to the seventeenth-century debate on colour would be to reject the scheme that ascribes the perception of line to the intellect and that of colour to the senses (the eye). For Lévi-Strauss, the apprehension of sensible qualities, whatever they may be, always requires an operation of the intellect, a logic. Colour is no exception. One explanation of why this should be the case is that sensible qualities are apprehended in relation to one another and that the processing of relations implies an operation of the intellect. It is not only the sensory

⁷ Merquior had already recognised that the concept of a logic of sensible qualities is incompatible with the maintenance of a dichotomy between sense perception and the intellect (Merquior 1977: 49–50). Merquior's point is that this is one of the major differences between a structural and a phenomenological approach to aesthetics. He points out that in the aesthetic theories of a phenomenologist such as Dufrenne, the aesthetic object 'resists' being extracted from the sensible and incorporated into a world of 'pragmatic meanings'. This is used to explain why it appeals directly to 'le sentiment' – i.e. 'feeling'/'sensation' – escaping, as it were, the grasp of intellectual understanding. Structural aesthetics, on the contrary, steers a middle course between 'intellectualism and anti-intellectualism' (1977: 48). In Merquior's words: 'Structural aesthetics seems to remove all metaphysical colouring to Hegel's definition of art as the sensible presentation of the Idea' (1977: 51). One may also cite here Marcel Hénaff: 'Savage thought (and we will see later that it is in this respect very close to the knowledge conveyed by works of art) is thought that operates directly on the level of signs, thus before any dissociation of the intelligible from the sensible' (1998: 143–4).

organs that mobilise the intellect, but the intellect that depends on the senses. As Lévi-Strauss put it in 1963, in the course of a debate with the philosophers of the group *Esprit* led by Paul Ricoeur: 'What is . . . meaning? It is a specific flavour perceived by my consciousness when it tastes a combination of elements which, taken on their own, would all taste differently' (*Esprit* 1963: 641, my translation). Food writer Sybil Kapoor comments on the way that the adjunction of lime juice to ripe papaya modifies both and brings out tastes that are not present in each of these foods when tasted separately (Kapoor 2003: 6). The acidity of the former transforms the bland sweetness of the latter. The process is analogous to the resolution of opposites in dialectical thinking. Systems of signs, like 'gustemes', mean something by virtue of the correlations and oppositions that connect them to other signs, and which confer upon them their unique identity. The intellect, like the tongue, is concerned with systems of differences: with the value of the opposition between the intellectual versions of sour and sweet and the new entity created by their combination. Ideas, in many ways, combine and contrast with one another in the manner that tastes do. This interaction of the 'higher' and 'lower' faculties, which lies at the core of structural anthropology, is also central to Baudelaire's aesthetics (I will return to this in chapter 4). As he puts it in his essay on the 1855 Exposition Universelle: 'setting aside their utility or the quantity of nutritive substance which they contain, the only way in which dishes differ from one another is in the *idea* which they reveal to the palate' (1965a: 124–5). It is also one of the keys to what connects Lévi-Strauss to Rousseau, who writes in *Emile*: 'Since man's first natural movements are . . . to measure himself against everything surrounding him and to experience in each object he perceives all the qualities which can be sensed and relate to him, his first study is a sort of experimental physics . . . Man's first reason is a reason of the senses; this sensual reason serves as the basis of intellectual reason' (Rousseau 1991: 125).

ANTHROPOLOGY AS AESTHETICS

In *The Savage Mind*, anthropology informs aesthetics and aesthetics informs anthropology. As I have already noted, it was the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten who, in his *Aesthetica*, first used the term aesthetic in a modern sense. In Ancient Greek the term *aisthesis* was used to denote sense perception. The *aistheta* were what we would today call sense data and were opposed to *noetia*, broadly speaking, thoughts. The same change in meaning occurs somewhere in between Kant's first and third *Critique*. The first part of the first section of the *Critique of Pure Reason*,

published in 1781, entitled 'Transcendental Aesthetic', is devoted to the analysis of the a priori conditions of possibility of sensation, namely time and space. It is not until Kant's third *Critique*, the *Critique of Judgment*, published in 1790, that he uses the term aesthetic to qualify so-called 'judgments of taste'. A famous footnote connects these two usages.

In *The Savage Mind*, Lévi-Strauss plays on the two senses of the word that were still in use during the eighteenth century, resurrecting its now defunct older meaning (in what follows, sense A) and combining it with the sense the word aesthetic has today (sense B). In the following passage, for example, Lévi-Strauss uses the term 'aesthetic' in sense A, i.e. as a straightforward synonym of 'sensory'. The context is his defence of the heuristic value of 'primitive' taxonomies.

It is legitimate, in classifying fruits into relatively heavy and relatively light, to begin by separating the apples from the pears even though shape, colour and taste are unconnected with weight and volume. This is because the larger apples are easier to distinguish from the smaller if the apples are not still mixed with fruit of different features. This example already shows that classification has its advantages even at the level of aesthetic perception. (1966b: 15; 1962b: 29)

Elsewhere, however, Lévi-Strauss combines senses A and B, as is apparent in the following passage, which provides a useful insight into Lévi-Strauss's basic model of sense perception, which is essentially combinatorial (here, as elsewhere, the linguistic model shapes his conceptions):

Modern chemistry reduces the variety of tastes and smells to different combinations of five elements: carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, sulphur and nitrogen. By means of tables of the presence and absence of the elements and estimates of proportions and minimum amounts necessary for them to be perceptible, it succeeds in accounting for differences and resemblances which were previously excluded from its field on account of their 'secondary' character. These connections and distinctions are however no surprise to our aesthetic sense. On the contrary they increase its scope and understanding by supplying a basis for the associations it already divined; and at the same time one is better able to understand why and in what conditions it should have been possible to discover such associations solely by the systematic use of intuitive methods. Thus to a logic of sensations tobacco smoke might be the intersection of two groups, one also containing broiled meat and brown crusts of bread (which are like it in being composed of nitrogen) and the other one to which cheese, beer and honey belong on account of the presence of diacetyl. (1966b: 12; 1962b: 25)

Here 'aesthetic sense' ('le sentiment esthétique') designates the principle upon which the 'primitive' scientist (taxonomer) bases his/her classifications. The implication, however, is that what enters into this 'intuitive'

grasping of secondary qualities is more than a mechanical act of perception of the kind referred to in the first of the two preceding quotes. This is borne out in Lévi-Strauss's subsequent comment about the classifications created by the 'primitive' scientist:

A 'primitive' philosopher or a poet could have effected these regroupings on the basis of considerations foreign to chemistry or any other form of science. Ethnographic literature reveals many of equal empirical and aesthetic value. And this is not just the result of some associative madness destined sometimes to succeed simply by the law of chance. Simpson . . . shows that the demand for organization is a need common to art and science . . . Given this, it seems less surprising that the aesthetic sense can by itself open the way to taxonomy and even anticipate some of its results. (1966b: 12–13; 1962b: 25)

Here, what Lévi-Strauss calls 'le sens esthétique' has taken on a fully modern (post-Kantian) sense, Lévi-Strauss's argument being that aesthetic perception, not simply in sense A but also in sense B, may have a role to play in the constitution of a 'primitive' science, which in turn explains why some of the results of this science may appear 'aesthetic' in the modern sense of the word. What matters in the context of the present argument is that the act of sensory 'intuition', which enables the 'primitive' scientist to go beyond appearances and make inferences about the properties of things on the basis of their 'secondary' qualities, requires a particular kind of assemblage of sense data that may already be described as 'aesthetic' in the modern sense (sense B). Aesthetic perception, in both senses of the expression, becomes a tool of understanding, capable of penetrating the world of appearances and granting access to a world of *intelligible* relationships.

This interplay of aesthetic intuition (senses A and B) is, more generally, at the very core of Lévi-Strauss's theory of cultural production. Lévi-Strauss's argument is that the logical structures (schemas) extracted from sensible reality by 'aesthetic intuition' provide the materials with which human beings create the symbolic systems constitutive of culture. This is the creative mainspring of the many different kinds of symbolic systems (myths, rituals, totemism, systems of classification, 'primitive' science, etc.) that make up 'primitive' culture and by extension culture in general. As Descola puts it: 'nature becomes . . . a kind of giant reservoir of observable properties in which the mind is free to delve to find objects that it can then convert into signs' (2004 : 298, my translation). Culture itself appears, in this context, as a kind of by-product of 'aesthetic intuition'.

Cultural and aesthetic invention function at a level at which sensory perception brings with it understanding. The particularity of art, like that of cultural creation construed as a form of *bricolage*, is that it invests *systems*

of secondary qualities with meaningfulness. What, then, differentiates art from the other symbolic systems produced by culture, such as 'primitive' science? One answer is that, unlike 'primitive' science, art exploits this system of signification not for practical purposes, but essentially for communicative ones. A reading of *The Savage Mind* from the point of view of aesthetics suggests that art may be viewed as the result of a deviation of concrete logic away from its practical or 'scientific' applications (up to a point, taken over by 'domesticated' thought) towards a non-purposive manipulation of the data of sense perception. In the hands of the artist, the secondary qualities observed by the 'primitive' scientist are no longer treated solely as signs of the hidden properties of things (on the model of the 'bitterness = toxicity' equation) but as the elements of an *autonomous* semiotic system. Here the 'bitterness = toxicity' equation is made to signify something else, it is assigned a value – in the linguistic sense of the term 'value', i.e. used to encode a 'message'. Lévi-Strauss's theory of a logic of sensible properties is thus at once the foundation of man's experience of and access to concrete reality and an independent principle for the construction of symbolic systems – among the main, art.

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A BRICOLEUR

Phaedo is a myth about pre-empirical life, about the fall of the soul into the body, although it also contains a theory of the 'participation' of thing and Idea (Dastur 2004: 16). In *Phaedo*, Socrates warns the philosopher in pursuit of truth and wisdom against the false testimony of the senses: 'If we're ever going to know anything purely, we must be rid of [the body], and must view the objects themselves with the soul by itself' (see Plato 1999: 12). The practice of philosophy according to Plato requires a discipline and an apprenticeship whose aim is to turn away from the constantly changing phenomenal world – an obstruction on the road to truth – to enable the philosopher to contemplate the immutable world of pure Forms. This is the 'detachment' of the soul from the body that makes Socrates compare philosophy to a form of death.

It will already have become apparent that Lévi-Strauss's theory of a logic of sensible qualities provides the basis for an ontology and an epistemology that is at the antipodes of the Platonic vision I have just outlined. The artist, as a practitioner of concrete logic, gains access to truth and knowledge, through his/her minute observation – and even tasting – of sensible reality. Sensible reality is not an obstruction to pure thought (logic) but the site of a complex experiment, a manipulation of 'nature' that is a privileged means

of access to 'truth' and understanding. In this context, one can see why Lévi-Strauss, throughout his works, so closely associates the figure of the artist with that of the *bricoleur*. The *bricoleur* is someone who works with his *hands* (1966b: 16; 1962b: 30) and in the process elaborates an artisan form of knowledge. The artist is a *bricoleur* for whom intellectual understanding is dependent on an act of fabrication, a thinker who subordinates theoretical understanding to the making of an object. His/her domain is that of what Aristotle called *poïesis* – a material construction or fabrication. And although both Plato and Aristotle ranked such a 'fabrication' as inferior to the theoretical understanding of the world pursued by the philosopher (as well as to political/moral action), they recognised that it contributes to this theoretical knowledge in at least two crucial ways: (1) the artisan must turn to nature for his/her models (the form of the bed he/she wants to make is derived from the many different kinds of existing beds) and (2) the artisan's work is itself an imitation of natural processes. This goes to the very heart of the epistemological value of art construed, within a structuralist perspective, as a form of *bricolage*, i.e. a manipulation of sensible elements. Through a reflexive understanding of the processes of fabrication – of the creative act – the artist/artisan contributes to an understanding of nature (how nature 'acts') because these processes are themselves natural processes.

MIMESIS IN A STRUCTURALIST PERSPECTIVE

In the next chapter, I will discuss in more detail, and with reference to concrete examples, the conception of the aesthetic sign to which Lévi-Strauss's theory of a logic of sensible qualities gives rise. But before doing so, I would like to look more closely at the implications of this theory for a general understanding of mimesis, i.e. the *imitation* of reality, one of the principal aims of Western art since antiquity.

One of Lévi-Strauss's central premises is that of the unity of mind and the world. Thus, the basic operations of human thought – the many kinds of inversions, parallelisms and other formal operations by which it proceeds, according to structuralism – are construed essentially as the continuation by other means of processes that occur in nature, processes that are described by biologists, geneticists and physicists. The eye, for example, carries out what is essentially a structural analysis of sensible reality. It patterns sense data in terms of a series of binary oppositions, such as that between the presence and absence of light, whether movement is horizontal or vertical, towards the left or the right. The basis of this structural activity

of the eye is to be found in the functioning of cells in the retina, that are themselves structurally divided in such a way that their periphery is sensitive to light and their centre to darkness (1987b: 116; 1983: 162). Thus: 'Structural analysis, which some critics dismiss as a gratuitous and decadent game, can only appear in the mind because its model is already present in the body' (1981: 692; 1971a: 619).

The senses fulfil, as Descola puts it, a *structural* role and not a *structuring* one (2004: 298). They do not pattern sensory data that would otherwise be inchoate but rather they *discover* a coding that already exists in the external world.

Sensory perception is construed, within this epistemological framework, as a translation process. It consists in the conversion of a code that is immanent to nature (ultimately reducible to the genetic code) into another that, via the relay of the senses, is made intelligible to the human mind. Reality itself is a text, a formula that echoes Baudelaire's characterisation of nature as a forest of symbols and, beyond that, the medieval idea of the Book of Nature. In the eyes of structuralism this 'text' is the reality with which we are in contact as human beings. As Lévi-Strauss writes in *A View from Afar*: 'Instead of opposing ideal and real, abstract and concrete, "emic" and "etic", one will recognize that the immediate data of perception cannot be reduced to any of these terms but lies in between: that is, already encoded by the sense organs as well as by the brain, in the manner of a *text* which, like any text, must be decoded so that it can be translated into the language of other texts' (1987b: 118; 1983: 164). Another version of this metaphor is given in the 'Finale' to *The Naked Man*: 'the operations of the senses have, from the start, an intellectual aspect, and the external data belonging to the categories of geology, botany, zoology, etc., are never apprehended intuitively in themselves, but always in the form of a text, produced through the joint action of the sense organs and the understanding' (1981: 678; 1971a: 607).⁸

What does this tell us about the reality with which the artist is confronted? One answer is that it is not so much an external reality that stands in opposition to the internal world of the artist, it is not a *surface* that one

⁸ A further variant of this metaphor is to be found in *The Savage Mind* where it is culture, and not simply the sense organs, that generates the 'text' through which we apprehend reality. Lévi-Strauss says about the differences that constitute culture: 'Once in evidence, they form a system which can be employed as a grid is used to decipher a text, whose original unintelligibility gives it the appearance of an uninterrupted flow. The grid makes it possible to introduce divisions and contrasts, in other words the formal conditions necessary for a [meaningful] message to be conveyed' (1966b: 75; 1962b: 95). (I have amended this translation.)

may observe from the vantage point of a detached eye, but something that is already of the order of a code.

Viewing art, and in particular representational art, from this vantage point reveals a new type of relationship between aesthetic sign and sensible reality. 'Reality' cannot simply be viewed as the realm of the referent, or significatum, as it is in traditional semiotic theories, i.e. as an external reality *designated* by the sign, however one wishes to understand the process of designation. Even when it explicitly purports to be an imitation of reality, the work of art entertains with the natural world a more complex ontological relationship. If art is indeed one of the offspring of 'wild' thinking, then aesthetic representation in general and the special case of mimesis must be seen as partaking in the process of translation whereby 'laws' (and a logic) are derived from the very properties of the real. It is in this that one may identify one of the key cognitive functions of art, according to structuralism. Art, like all 'wild' modes of thought, flourishes at the borderline between the sensible and the intelligible, a borderline which we cannot construe simply as a limit between the self and the world, as the gesture of the artist placing his/her canvas *in front of* a landscape misleadingly suggests. It is the site of a complex interaction between sense data, the mind and the creative imagination, an interaction which is an object of aesthetic as well as scientific inquiry. And it is the site, if my reading of Lévi-Strauss is accurate, of the development of Lévi-Strauss's 'logic of sensible properties'. One may relate the abandonment of the mimetic ideal, which characterises the evolution of Western art in the modern era, to the epistemological shift that, from the Enlightenment onwards, saw the refiguration of our relation as sensing subjects to the objects of our perceptions. If the role of the mind is to fuse together the images and sensations generated by the sense organs – which are never passively received, but translated into a 'text' – with others originating in memory, the imagination, fantasy even, thus giving birth to the world as we know it, then that of 'modern' art is to attempt to record this 'birth', to grasp the world not as a pre-existing reality but as perpetually coming-into-being, as an artefact in its own right. Such a view recalls the task that Paul Klee assigns to the 'modern' artist (although what he means by genesis is very different from what structuralism does):

[The artist] does not attach such intense importance to natural forms as do so many realist critics, because, for him, these final forms are not the real stuff of the process of natural creation. For he places more value on the powers which do the forming than in the final forms themselves . . . Thus he surveys with a penetrating eye the finished forms which nature places before him. The deeper he looks, the

more readily he can extend his view from the present to the past, the more deeply he is impressed by the one essential image of creation itself, as Genesis, rather than the image of nature, the finished product. (1948: 45)

In contrast with this modernist conception of art, one may read the illusionistic realism of a painting such as Louis David's *The Oath of the Horatii* (1784) as an expression of the neoclassical belief in the representability of an objective world that exists independently from the perceiving subject, a 'real' world beyond the 'text' (although, here too, things are more complicated than that, since the subject of David's painting is a mythologically transposed reality).

CHAPTER 3

The work of art as a system of signs

In the previous chapter, I began by bringing to light the genealogical argument, implicit in *The Savage Mind*, that presents art as one among several ‘descendants’ of a ‘wild’ mode of thought whose origins may be traced to the Neolithic and beyond. I went on to argue that in theorising the mode of symbolisation specific to this ‘wild’ mode of thought – rooted in what he calls ‘concrete logic’ or ‘logic of sensible qualities’ – Lévi-Strauss provides an original solution to a question that lies at the core of philosophical aesthetics, that of the relation between conceptual–abstract thinking and sensory perception. Lévi-Strauss unites the subjective and objective dimensions of experience in a logic of sensory qualities and places this logic at the heart of what makes us, as social animals, producers of symbolic systems. In this chapter, I will turn to the question of what this logic of sensible qualities may teach us about aesthetic signs. What are the implications of Lévi-Strauss’s imbrication of sense perception and logic for an aesthetic theory of signification? Beyond some of the popular misconceptions about structuralist/semiotic theories of art, Lévi-Strauss’s works still contain untapped insights. I should state, from the outset, that to speak of ‘aesthetic signs’ is a short-hand and an artifice. In art, contrary to linguistics, there is no objective method for identifying so-called minimal units of signification. Art ‘signifies’ in many different ways, and holistically, not by addition of discrete units of signification, like natural languages (the totalities that are works of art are nevertheless made up of parts). Furthermore, the way in which ‘aesthetic signs’ produce meaning is not fixed once and for all: it varies from epoch to epoch, from art form to art form and, indeed, from artist to artist. What follows is thus more accurately described as an exploration of the legitimacy of the *analogy* that assimilates works of art to systems of signs and hence to a ‘language’.

HOW SIGNS SIGNIFY

The traditional semiotic model of communication – linguistic or other – that has grown out of Saussurian linguistics presents signification as a

triangular relation. The terms used to designate the points on this triangle vary from analyst to analyst. In Saussure's vocabulary, they are the signifier (point A), the signified (point B) and the referent (point C). The signifier is the material 'object' doing the signifying. In the case of language, this material 'object' is made up of one or more sounds and constitutes a lexeme. The signified is the concept with which a signifier is associated. The referent is the thing or class of things in the world that the sign denotes. In Saussurian linguistics, a sign is always made up of the association of a signifier and a signified. This basic model of signification may be extended, to include, for example, the interpretant (as Pierce does) and raises complex issues over which semanticists are still worrying (Lyons 1991: 99). Taking the triangle of signification in its most general and uncontentious aspects, it brings to the fore two features of any process of signification that are of particular interest to us here. The first is that the function of a sign, construed as something that stands for something else, is to 'point' towards some other entity, be it a concept or a referent. The sign 'points' in a number of different ways, as we shall see below. The second is that signification involves mediation. In John Lyons's diagrammatic representation of the triangle of signification, the line between A and C (the base of the triangle) is represented as a dotted line to emphasise the fact that the connection between lexeme (i.e. signifier) and its significatum (referent) is indirect. It goes, as it were, via the concept, i.e. the signified. He captures this feature of signification by quoting a scholastic maxim: 'vox significat [rem] mediantibus conceptibus' or 'the word signifies [the thing] by means of mediating concepts' (1991: 96). Looking at things from a slightly different angle, one may also say that the relation between signified (i.e. the concept) and referent is indirect, as it is established via the material intermediary of the signifier. The mind is connected to the world via the sign.

One common criticism levelled at structural theories of the aesthetic sign is that they enclose the work of art in a system made up signifiers and signifieds and ignore the problem of the relation between the sign and the material world. Such a view is summed up by Alex Potts, who identifies the following aspect of Saussurian linguistics as having been particularly influential in shaping a certain kind of semiotic approach to art, one that he opposes to that afforded by the theories of Pierce: 'With Saussure, the sign is defined in terms of a physical entity or signifier, and a nonmaterial meaning, or signified, while reference to anything outside the system of signs is deliberately left out of the account' (Potts 1996: 19). This is not quite the case. Saussure did not leave the referent out, but rather postulated

that the relationship between the sign and the referent – *in the special case of linguistic signs* – is ‘arbitrary’, by which he meant that it is a matter of pure convention. There is no inherent reason why the sounds making up the word ‘tree’ should be used to signify the class of things known as trees, as opposed to the sounds making up the word ‘arbre’, as is the case in French. Saussure does not suggest that other sign systems, such as works of art for example, should obey the same principle of arbitrariness. And Lévi-Strauss does not bracket out the referent in his own theory of signification, or suggest that the relation to the referent is arbitrary. On the contrary, the value of Lévi-Strauss’s theory, as I will show, lies precisely in the novel relation it establishes between the sign and what lies ‘outside the system of signs’, a relationship that he does not see simply as one of substitution (one thing standing for another). Structural anthropology reveals some of the ways in which signs have the power of *constituting* the things that they designate, of giving existence to reality. In doing so, it sheds new light on the mediation inherent in the process of signification.

In what sense are sign systems constitutive of the things they designate? This seems paradoxical. Signs, logically, come *after* the things they designate. Structural anthropology verifies, in its own way, the biblical theory of creation: ‘In the beginning was the Word’ (John 1:1), although it explains this conundrum without resorting to theology. Just how it does so is arguably best shown by examining some concrete examples: Lévi-Strauss’s analysis of three sign systems. These examples are drawn from very different contexts: totemic classifications (*The Savage Mind*), Amerindian mythology (*Myth and Meaning*) and poetry (*The View from Afar*). Lévi-Strauss himself does not explicitly connect the three texts I will examine here, which, on the surface of things, may seem to have little in common. However, once juxtaposed, it becomes apparent that each in its own way is dependent on the same general theory of signification.

Let us start with the example seemingly most distant from aesthetic concerns, Lévi-Strauss’s analysis of totemism in *The Savage Mind*. Lévi-Strauss had already demonstrated in an earlier work (1964b; 1962a) that totemism – the association of a clan or social group with a totem or animal ancestor, whose name it bears – was simply one among many kinds of classificatory tools used by ‘primitive’ societies. Lévi-Strauss interpreted totemism as a way of encoding social differences between clans in terms of differences between animal or plant species. Totemism, Lévi-Strauss argued, is essentially an elaborate metaphor; it states something like ‘the differences between clan A and clan B are analogous to that between species A and species B’. Each totem, however, is more than a signifier of such

and such a clan. It is a means of conceptualising and *thereby creating the social group as such*. What is of particular interest to us here is that it does so by exploiting 'the logical power and the dynamism of the notion of species' (1966b: 138; 1962b: 167), the key to how totems are used as signs. Let us explain.

Logicians distinguish between the *comprehension* and the *extension* of a concept. The comprehension of a concept is, in short, the set of attributes that belong to that concept, or rather to the members of the class of things designated by it. For example, one may define the concept 'yellow Minis', from the point of view of its comprehension, by saying that they are yellow, that they possess four wheels, a petrol engine, etc. The extension of a concept is the set of 'objects', real or ideal, to which that concept applies or which it designates; here, the set of cars to which the concept 'yellow Minis' applies. The extension and comprehension of a concept vary in inverse proportion to one another. The fewer the attributes possessed by a concept, the greater its extension, and vice-versa. As the author of the article 'Comprehension' in Lalande's *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie* puts it:

I call him Jacques. It is clear that this name expresses the complete idea of this individual, i.e. all the ideas that the name evokes. I put him together with a certain number of other individuals, different from him in many ways, but that also have a lot in common. I form a class of individuals . . . In this way, I form successively the words and ideas 'European', 'man', 'animal' and finally 'being', which is the most general term available to us, since it applies to all that exists. It is clear that these highly composite ideas encompass increasingly greater numbers of individuals, which is their *extension*, but each one possesses fewer particularities, occurs in fewer circumstances, which is their *comprehension*. (My translation)

According to Lévi-Strauss, the 'dynamism' of the notion of species, as a classificatory tool, and hence sign, resides in the intermediary position it occupies between the point of view afforded by comprehension and that afforded by extension. The species is 'logically equidistant from the extreme forms of classification: categorical and singular' (1966b: 136; 1962b: 165). Let us take the example of a particular totemic animal, the royal eagle, which is used by some North American populations. Lévi-Strauss's point is that the royal eagle may be envisaged from two alternative points of view: either, extensively, as a collection of individuals (all royal eagles) or, comprehensively, as a system of features or definitions – i.e. as an organism, an animal made up of claws, wings, a beak, etc. In the first case, the species may be used to signify the members of a social group by comparing them to the individuals that make up a given species. In the

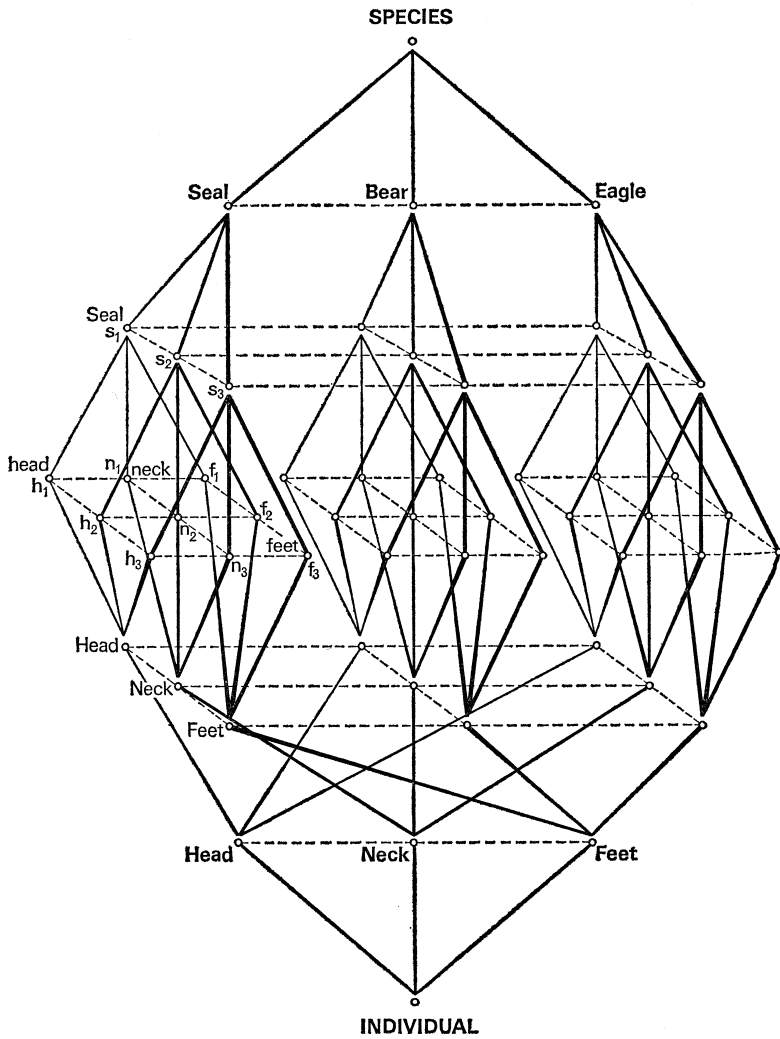


Illustration 1: 'The totemic operator' (in *The Savage Mind*). Diagram by Claude Lévi-Strauss. Illustrates how the notion of 'species' may be used as a logical operator.

second, the species may be used, in the manner of the metaphor of the 'body politic', to signify the group as a whole, comparing the individuals of which it is comprised to the parts of the organism that make up the species, each part of the social group being like a part of the organism: its wings, its beak, its claws, etc. (1966b: 136–7; 1962b: 165–6). We can see, here, how the sign works as a logical operator: 'The notion of species . . . possesses an internal dynamic: being a collection poised between two systems, the species is the operator which allows (and even makes obligatory) the passage from the unity of a multiplicity to the diversity of a unity' (1966b: 136; 1962b: 166). In other words the specific function of the totemic animal, as a sign, is to enable the passage between two alternative conceptions of the social group: as a species in the sense of a collection of individuals (the point of view of extension) or as a species different from other species, i.e. as a distinct organism made up of various functionally related parts (the point of view of comprehension). More generally, the totemic animal enables the detotalisation and retotalisation of any complex entity, which is what happens when totemic thought alternates between a conception of the animal as a signifier of the species (i.e. as a signifier of the collection of individuals of which the species is constituted) and a conception of the animal as a signifier of the unique entity that is the species (e.g. the royal eagle), seen in contrast to other species. Lévi-Strauss illustrates the dynamism inherent in the notion of species – the key to its *use* as a sign – in his diagram of the 'totemic operator' (1966b: 152; 1962b: 184), which one may see as concrete logic in action. It consists in a logical schema *extracted from images of the sensible world*.

The case of totemic classifications illustrates the more general principle brought to light by *The Savage Mind*, which is of particular interest to the aesthetician, namely how signs may be used not only to signify but to carry out a certain kind of logical operation. Signs here are used as a symbolic *tool*, to construct a social system. This aspect of the use of signs is something that Lévi-Strauss had already formulated in his earlier theories about shamanism, where he introduced the notion of symbolic *efficacy* (1963a: 186–205; 1958: 205–26). With totemic classifications, the world is apprehended through the mediating prism afforded by the totemic animal. It would not be enough to equate the royal eagle to a signifier, and the clan it designates to its corresponding signified. It is by means of the signifier (the totem) that the clan is *constituted* as an object of thought and hence brought into existence. In the structural scheme of things, sign systems do not only 'point' to the world, or represent it, they are the means by which a certain version of reality is constructed. Signs mediate between the mind and the

world. This mediation functions at a number of different levels: aesthetic, as we shall see, but also ideological (sign systems are systems of *values*; classifications imply hierarchies) and ontological. As Lévi-Strauss comments: 'the diversity of species furnishes man with the most intuitive picture at his disposal and constitutes the most direct manifestation he can perceive of the ultimate discontinuity of reality. It is the sensible expression of an objective coding' (1966b: 137; 1962b: 166).

Let us take another example, closer to art, of how symbols may be put to use according to a logic immanent to their sensible qualities. There is a group of myths from western Canada (1978a: 21; 1981: 543–5; 1971a: 487–90) that tell the story of how the early beings that populated the world, which were part-human and part-animal, fought and defeated the incessant winds that made their life a misery. According to a large number of versions of these myths,¹ this victory was secured owing to the help of a skate. In the Salish version, the victory won by the skate results in a pact between the humans and the South Winds whereby the latter agree to blow only intermittently. These episodes are curious and raise the question of why it is specifically a skate – albeit a mythical being with magical powers – that each of these myths identifies as the victor of the enemy winds.

The answer to this question goes to the heart of the theory of signification I have started to outline.² It is worth quoting in full Lévi-Strauss's analysis of this particular sign – the 'mytheme' of the skate – because it reveals in what sense the class of signs to which it belongs depends on mechanisms of signification that differ from those ordinarily identified in the literature on this topic:

The skate acts on account of very precise characteristics, which are of two kinds. The first one is that it is a fish like all flat fish, slippery underneath and rough on the back. And the other capacity, which allows the skate to escape very successfully when it has to fight against other animals, is that it is very large seen from above or below, and extremely thin when seen from the side. An adversary may think that it is very easy to shoot an arrow and kill a skate because it is so large; but just as the arrow is being aimed, the skate can suddenly turn or slip and show only its profile, which, of course, is impossible to aim at; thus it escapes. So the reason why the skate is chosen is that it is an animal which, considered from either one point of view or another, is capable of giving – let's say in terms of cybernetics – only 'yes'

¹ Those told by the Salish of south Puget Sound, the Klallam and the coastal Quinault and Quileute. See myths M783 to M785 in the *Mythologiques*.

² Lévi-Strauss also develops a theory of the aesthetic sign in the *Conversations with Charbonnier*, which I will deal with in chapter 6. My interest here is in the level of the implicit, in the connections between anthropology and aesthetics that underpin Lévi-Strauss's thinking without necessarily being formulated as such.

or 'no' answers. It is capable of two states which are discontinuous, and one is positive, and one is negative . . . From a logical point of view [it has] a relationship with a problem which is also a binary problem. If the South Wind blows every day of the year, then life is impossible for mankind. But if it blows only one day out of two – 'yes' one day, and 'no' the other day and so on – then a kind of compromise becomes possible between the needs of mankind and the conditions prevailing in the natural world. (1978a: 22–3)

The skate is not a sign in any ordinary sense of the term. It has a quasi mathematical role in solving the problem with which the myth is concerned, namely how to stop the wind from blowing incessantly and allow the resumption of normal social life. It is an image that, as Lévi-Strauss puts it, is made 'to play the part of conceptual thinking' (1978a: 22). And it does so according to a logic that is found *in* its physical attributes.

Lévi-Strauss's model of signification, as seen through mythical thought, is very different from a traditional semiotic conception of the sign as an entity that *points* to a meaning outside itself. This becomes apparent if one is to consider the preceding example in the light of Pierce's influential typology of sign systems. Although his typology of signs is more complex than commentators have sometimes suggested (it differentiates up to ten different classes of signs, with overlapping features), these may be reduced to a distinction between three kinds: symbols, icons and indexes. Pierce's classification aims to account for the various kinds of possible relations that may exist between the form of a sign and the thing towards which the sign is supposed to point (its referent or significatum). With symbols, this relation is deemed to be purely conventional, i.e. arbitrary. This is the kind of relation that pertains, as we have seen, in natural languages, between words and the things they signify (with the exception of onomatopoeia). With icons, the relationship between the form of the sign and its meaning is dependent on some 'natural' resemblance. There are, of course, many different ways in which one thing may resemble another, which is why this category admits a broad range of signs, from portraits to ideograms. Finally, with indexical signs there is always, in the words of John Lyons, 'some known or assumed connection between a sign A [in the triangle of signification] and its significatum C such that the occurrence of A can be held to imply the presence or existence of C' (1991: 106). Here the relationship between the form of the sign and its meaning is one of material contiguity; i.e. it is metonymical. One example given by Pierce is the bullet hole signifying the bullet, another is smoke signifying fire.

The mytheme of the skate, construed as a sign, and more specifically as a sign that can teach us something about aesthetic signs in general, cannot

easily be described as either symbolic, iconic or indexical. Its mode of signification is other.

The skate is an example of a particular kind of recurring mythical image that Lévi-Strauss calls a 'binary operator', which he analyses in detail in one of the concluding sections of *The Naked Man* (there are other kinds of operators that are not binary). Their function, as the above quotation makes clear, is to solve a given problem in terms of a yes/no answer. These mythological images or signs (mythemes), like all of those analysed throughout the *Mythologiques*, function like algorithms (1981: 537; 1971a: 481). In logic, an algorithm is defined as a procedure for determining the value of a function. An example of a mathematical function is addition. The skate is used as a sign, by mythical thought, in an analogous way to an algorithm in maths, for solving mythical problems of a binary type, other kinds of problems requiring other kinds of signs or aesthetic images. Like the totem, it is a tool for carrying out a certain kind of formal operation. Signs or images can be put to use in this way because, as we have already seen in what precedes, there is a logic immanent to sensible reality, to the images that make up our perceptual world, hence the imbrication of conceptual-abstract thought and sense perception discussed in chapter 2.

What Lévi-Strauss's analysis emphasises is the *operative* value of the skate as a sign, its ability to be put to use in the solving of a logical problem, and it is in this sense that its meaningfulness cannot be adequately described as symbolic, iconic or indexical, in the senses that Pierce gives to these terms.³ As Lévi-Strauss further comments in *Myth and Meaning*: 'While it is obviously wrong and impossible from an empirical point of view that a fish is able to fight a wind, from a logical point of view we can understand why *images* borrowed from experience can be put to use' (1978a: 22).

What is of particular interest in the present context is Lévi-Strauss's uncovering of a logic *inherent in* the skate's sensible attributes. Its secondary qualities – such as its shape, which varies according to whether the skate is observed from above or the side; the texture of its skin, which can be either slippery or rough – are used to support logical oppositions. The skate, as an image, is the site of a series of formal operations, the locus of a mytho-poetical calculus. Art, arguably, involves a similar kind of calculus.

This is what comes out from Lévi-Strauss's seldom discussed essay, 'A Small Mythico-Literary Puzzle' (1987b: 210–18), on Apollinaire's 'Les Colchiques' (reproduced below). Written some eighteen years after *The*

³ As Marcel Hénaff puts it: 'A symbolic system ... organizes elements into an *operating system*' (1998: 127).

Savage Mind, it illustrates the gradual conversion, over time, of Lévi-Strauss's anthropological ideas about processes of signification in culture in general into a theory of poetic invention. This essay shows how a poetic image may function in an analogous way to the symbols analysed by Lévi-Strauss in his anthropological work, i.e. as an algorithm for carrying out a logical operation. Here, as we shall see, the operation is a particular kind of inversion.

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORY OF POETIC INVENTION

Les colchiques

Le pré est vénéneux mais joli en automne
Les vaches y paissant
Lentement s'empoisonnent
Le colchique couleur de cerne et de lilas
Y fleurit tes yeux sont comme cette fleur-là
Violâtres comme leur cerne et comme cet automne
Et ma vie pour tes yeux lentement s'empoisonne

Les enfants de l'école viennent avec fracas
Vêtus de hoquetons et jouant de l'harmonica
Ils cueillent les colchiques qui sont comme des mères
Filles de leurs filles et sont couleur de tes paupières
Qui battent comme les fleurs battent au vent dément

Le gardien du troupeau chante tout doucement
Tandis que lentes et meuglant les vaches abandonnent
Pour toujours ce grand pré mal fleuri par l'automne⁴

⁴ **Meadow Saffron**

The meadow is poisonous but pretty in the fall
The cows that pasture there
Slowly become poisoned
Meadow saffron the colour of lilacs and of the skin around eyes
Flower there your eyes are like that flower
Bluish purple like the skin around them and like this fall
And for your eyes my life has slowly become poisoned

Kids out of school come noisily
Wearing jackets and playing mouth organs
They pick the meadow saffron which are like mothers
Daughters of their daughters and the colour of your eyelids
Fluttering as flowers flutter in a mad wind

Lévi-Strauss's interpretation focuses on the meaning of a phrase contained in the poem which has given rise to much critical speculation, the 'mytho-poetic enigma' to which the title of his essay refers. The phrase is 'mothers daughters of their daughters', which Apollinaire uses to qualify the colchicums. Why does Apollinaire use this curious phrase and what does it mean? The first part of the answer to this question is botanical. Having consulted 'older botanical works' which 'are more attentive than modern ones to the perceptible aspects of things' (1987b: 211; 1983: 292), Lévi-Strauss points out that, in the past, these plants were sometimes referred to as *Filius-ante-patrem*. This is because of an oddity in the procreative cycle of colchicums. The flower-heads are thrown up straight from the ground in autumn *before* the foliage appears the following spring. In other words, the procreative cycle of the colchicum presents the image of an inverted genealogy in which the 'sons' – the flowers – come before and seem to engender the 'fathers' – the leaves. The crux of Lévi-Strauss's argument rests on the proposition that the poem, viewed as a semiotic system, also appears to present the image of an 'inverted genealogy'. How is this? At the heart of the poem there lies a comparison between the lilac-coloured flowers and the eyes of the woman with whom the poet has fallen in love. The latter 'poison' the poet's life in the same way that the colchicums poison the field in which they grow. The flowers, in other words, are a signifier for the lover's eyes. This is a fairly standard use of metaphor. In it, the flowers are used as signifiers of the poet's lover's eyes, which are the signified. This use of metaphor illustrates one of the basic mechanisms whereby signs are commonly understood to be generated. Lévi-Strauss cites here the famous mathematician René Thom, who puts it as follows: 'In the interaction of signified and signifier it is plain that, swept along by the universal flow, the signified emits, engenders the signifier in an uninterrupted, ramifying [growth]' (as cited 1987b: 216; 1983: 297).⁵ At its simplest, this 'ramifying growth' is what accounts for the fact that we invariably possess several synonymous words to express the same thing or idea.

However, when Apollinaire later describes the colchicums as 'couleur de cerne' ('the colour of eye-shadow') and as 'couleur de tes paupières' ('the

The guardian of the herd sings softly
As slowly the bellowing cows abandon
Forever this great meadow ill-flowered by the fall

(Trans. D. M. Black, in Chandler 2000: 13)

⁵ I have amended the translation.

colour of your eye-lids') and compares their fluttering in the wind to batting eyes, the preceding naturalist use of metaphor is given what one may describe as a modernist twist *and the relationship between signifier and signified is inverted* in a manner that is analogous, Lévi-Strauss argues, to the inversion between father and son/mother and daughter *already encoded in the plant's atypical procreative cycle*. '[Apollinaire] is making the eyelids the signifier of the flowers, which are transformed from being the signifier of the eyelids into the signified' (1987b: 217; 1983: 298). Lévi-Strauss hypothesises that this inversion is the very basis of the poem. The latter comes into being – and, one might add, affirms its singularity in literary history as a modernist work – by means of this 'genealogical' inversion between signifier and signified, whereby the 'son' (the signifier 'colchicum') engenders the 'father' (the signified 'eyes'). One may cite now the remainder of the quotation by the mathematician René Thom reproduced by Lévi-Strauss, which sums up this inversion: 'But the signifier re-creates the signified every time we interpret the sign. And, as exemplified by biological forms, the signifier (the offspring) can become the signified (the parent); all it takes is a single generation' (1987b: 216; 1983: 297).

Lévi-Strauss's reading is concerned with the genesis of this poem as a semiotic system and with the mental processes involved in this act of creation. He tries to grasp these not through the study of manuscripts or of Apollinaire's sources, but of the poem's own indirect encoding of the act of creation. Lévi-Strauss tries to show how the poem, and the unusual figure of thought he places at its source, emerge directly from the eponymous flower. He shows how a poetic image, that of a particular flower, with its particular reproductive cycle, may contain, in embryonic form, a figure of thought, and hence give rise to a poem. Here, the colchicum is construed as something like a concrete model of the morphogenesis of the poem 'Les colchiques' (all works of art, in a sense, tell the story of their own genesis, and aesthetic appreciation often amounts to an attempt to reconstruct that story: the object is viewed through the prism of a narrative about its own coming-into-being).

There are other possible explanations of the origin of the curious phrase 'mothers daughters of their daughters'. Lévi-Strauss points out its similarity with eighth-century texts about the Virgin Mary ('daughter of God, mother of God'), for example, and many other sources still (1987b: 213–15; 1983: 294–6). Aesthetic images are almost always overdetermined. The broader significance of this interpretation in the context of my argument so far is the continuity it establishes between the mechanisms of poetic invention and those of 'wild' thinking (concrete logic). Lévi-Strauss shows

that Apollinaire's poem emerges directly from the sensible properties of a flower.

This reading of 'Les colchiques' presents the poem as an exploration of the semiotic potential of the image of the flower, an image that, like the skate in the myth referred to above, is the sensible source of the intelligible semiotic system that is the poem. This is confirmed at other levels of analysis of the poem, such as its melancholy mood, which Lévi-Strauss traces to the autumnal associations of the colchicum, which in the nineteenth century was also known as 'veillotte' – a reference to the long evenings spent in darkness (in French 'veillées') at the time when the plant flowers.⁶ Lévi-Strauss also uncovers a system of temporal intervals and of movements encoded in the references to the flowers, the children and the cows (the abrupt coming and going of the children, the slow grazing of the cows and the horizontal reproduction of the colchicums are integrated into a triangular system of oppositions). The process of poetic creation, seen in this light, involves a conversion of secondary qualities into a system of signifiers. The formation of the poem reflects in a microcosm the more general process whereby, according to Lévi-Strauss, culture is created. As he writes in *The Savage Mind*, the 'dialectic of superstructures' consists in the extraction of constitutive units from sensible reality and their integration into a system 'which plays the part of a synthesizing operator between ideas and facts, thereby turning the latter into *signs*. The mind thus passes from empirical diversity to conceptual simplicity and then from conceptual simplicity to meaningful syntheses' (1966b: 131; 1962b: 160). Culture as a whole arises out of a similar process to poetic invention. Summing up this view of cultural invention, Lévi-Strauss says about the products of 'wild' thinking – be they myths, rituals, classificatory systems or works of art – that they consist in a reorganisation of sensible experience within a semantic system. It is this same basic mechanism of semiotic invention that Lévi-Strauss identifies in poetry when he says about Apollinaire's flowers: 'the concrete peculiarities given them by nature and the semantic function

⁶ *Colchicum autumnalis* (meadow saffron in English, and commonly named naked ladies) belongs to the lily family and is a sinister, delicate, bruised-flesh-like naked flower. It is very poisonous, and fatal to livestock, and is also the source of a narcotic drug, colchine. Richard Mabey, in his *Flora Britannica*, compares it to a 'flowering toadstool' and quotes a twentieth-century agricultural report that indicates that children were sometimes sent out in the morning to inspect meadows and pick the flowers before cattle were sent in. This may also be what Apollinaire's children are doing? Geoffrey Grigson's *The Englishman's Flora* gives the ancient Assyrian name 'Come Let Us Copulate'. The poem's title is sometimes translated as 'Autumn Crocus', but that plant, *Crocus nudiflora*, which belongs to the crocus family, is not the plant Apollinaire seems to have had in mind. My thanks to Frances Brown for having drawn my attention to the above.

given them by the poet can be united in these flowers, which have become signs' (1987b: 216–17; 1983: 298). Anthropology becomes poetics and poetics becomes anthropology.

THE SENSIBLE AND THE INTELLIGIBLE

The more general aesthetic principle implied in this conception of poetic invention is suggested by the epigraph by Paul Valéry that Lévi-Strauss places at the start of his essay on 'Les colchiques': 'Poetry is the meeting-place of points equidistant from the purely sensory and the purely intelligible – in the field of language' (Valéry 2000b: 232). The sensible, in Lévi-Strauss's essay, is the *image* of the colchicum, and the intelligible the system of significations Apollinaire extracts from it. Lévi-Strauss, here, is no doubt somewhat modifying Valéry's meaning. The 'pure sensible' to which Valéry is probably referring in the above quotation is the sound texture of words and other material features of language, which poetry invests with meaning. For Valéry, a poem is always an aggregate of its semantic content proper and the meanings vehicled by its acoustic dimension, which constitutes a plastic creation in its own right. Where Lévi-Strauss's meaning does accord with Valéry's is in the broader aesthetic principle that the aesthetic sign, whatever the sensory medium in which it is incarnated, must always be a hybrid entity: at once sensible and intelligible. Valéry's definition of poetry may be extended to other art forms. Painting, for example, may be seen, by analogy, to exist in a space equidistant from the pure sensible and the pure intelligible in the field of the visual, whereas music inhabits the same space, in the field of musical sound.

Lévi-Strauss's analyses of the use of images in totemic classifications, 'primitive' myth and poetry reveal the embodied nature of aesthetic thought, its requirement never to separate theoretical understanding from the concrete images that are the means and condition of that understanding. The distinctiveness of art as a language or system of communication resides in the fact that it embeds its messages (the intelligible half of the equation) in the medium it uses to express them (the sensible half of the equation). This differentiates art from other systems of communication in which the code is 'transparent', those in which the code by virtue of which meanings are assigned to sensible forms (visual or auditory) is, as it were, detachable from those meanings. It is possible, in theory at least, to separate the medium from the message, and re-encode the same message in another medium without significant loss. With traffic lights, for example, there is no necessary relation between 'red' and the message 'stop' or 'green'

and the message 'go', although once the system is put in place these colours may acquire supporting associations, such as that between red, fire and danger. But these associations are *a posteriori*. They are not constitutive of the sign system as such. This is why traffic lights are better described as a system of signals than as a system of signs. With the work of art, it is impossible to separate the signal (the red light) from its meaning ('stop') without in some way destroying the sign. In the first case, the medium is a mere vehicle for conveying messages that could equally well have been conveyed using a different medium or code. The situation of the artist is different. It resembles that of the *bricoleur*: 'By his craftsmanship he constructs a material object which is *also* an object of knowledge' (1966b: 22; 1962b: 37). The result is that, to borrow a formula used by Lévi-Strauss in the 'Finale' of *The Naked Man*, 'every aesthetic signifier is the sensory manifestation of a structure' (1981: 642; 1971a: 574). The key to what Lévi-Strauss is saying here is his affirmation of the inseparability of the sensible and intelligible dimensions of the aesthetic sign. The aesthetic sign (work of art) is the result of the fusion of a structure – an unconscious mental structure – and a sensible form. Aesthetic thought operates at a level that precedes the split between the sensible and the intelligible, a split that is the condition of existence of domesticated, i.e. logocentric, thought and, by extension, science. This is no doubt why Lévi-Strauss finds it problematic when the artist tries to create works of art out of 'artificially arranged and conscious structures' (1981: 641; 1971a: 573), as is the case, for example, with certain forms of computer generated music, or some of the formally generated examples of the *nouveau roman*. Here, independent logical structures are used, arbitrarily, to generate works of art. This formal game differs from Lévi-Strauss's conception of the act of creation, which brings to light structures already contained in the materials used by the artist.

Camus comments in a review of Sartre's *Nausea* that every novel is a 'philosophie mise en images' (1965: 1417) and that a good novel is one in which all the philosophy has been converted into images. It is a similar principle that motivates Lévi-Strauss to say in an interview for the *Cahiers du Cinéma* that he prefers Hitchcock to Bergman. He sees Bergman as the prototype of the intellectual, self-conscious film maker. He is comparable, in painting, says Lévi-Strauss, to Rembrandt: 'I don't like painters who philosophise about their painting and I don't like film makers who use film to philosophise. The philosophy – if it exists – should be in the arrangement of the images, in the way in which they unfold, and not in messages we are bombarded with' (Lévi-Strauss 1965b: 27, my translation). In the

context of an extended analogy between film and painting he compares Hitchcock to Ingres, of whom Lévi-Strauss approves because he doesn't separate the sensible and the intelligible: 'his messages are embodied in colours and shapes, they directly speak a plastic language' (1965b: 28).

These casual remarks about his personal preferences regarding film confirm the basic principle enunciated in the more theoretical parts of his work, namely the necessity for the aesthetic sign, whatever its form, always to remain, as Valéry puts it, half-way between the sensible and the intelligible. Should the aesthetic sign be moved along this continuum towards its intelligible pole, it risks being confused first with the linguistic sign that establishes a purely conventional relation between its sensible and intelligible components (the former is in the service of the latter), and second with the mathematical sign, construed as a pure concept, free from any sensible embodiment. Should it be moved in the other direction, towards the sensible pole of the continuum, the aesthetic sign would renounce its specificity – and meaningfulness – by merging with the percept, the mechanical product of an act of perception, and finally with reality itself. We can now better understand the necessity formulated by Valéry, endorsed by Lévi-Strauss, namely that the aesthetic sign should be *equidistant* from the 'pure sensible' and the 'pure intelligible'.

Talking about the signs used by the *bricoleur*, Lévi-Strauss makes the following key comment for an understanding of his aesthetic thought: 'Images cannot be ideas but they can play the part of signs or, to be more precise, co-exist with ideas in signs and if ideas are not yet present, they can keep their future place open for them and make its contours apparent negatively' (1966b: 20; 1962b: 34). Apollinaire's colchicum is an image of this kind. It contains the trace of an idea, that of a particular kind of genealogical inversion. This is why the *bricoleur* that is Apollinaire may put it to use, bring the latent idea contained in the image to the fore and, by integrating it into a poem, convert it into an aesthetic system. The aesthetic sign may be construed on this model as a form of 'cohabitation' between an image and an idea, one in which the image, as a material being, has not yet been integrally assimilated to the idea (as is the case with the signs used in ordinary linguistic communication) and sometimes does no more than point towards the idea's future existence. Said differently: the meaning of the sign is immanent to the sign. I have already argued that within a Lévi-Straussian perspective, one cannot satisfactorily account for the meaning of the aesthetic sign by virtue of the fact that it points to or 'designates' a significatum, in the manner of the symbol, the icon or the index (although it may *also* do that). Rather, it contains, within its very form, a certain

charge of meaning. David Hockney's depictions of the Santa Monica mountains are a representation of these mountains and in this sense function in the manner of a symbol as defined by Pierce. In this respect, they are meaningful by virtue of their iconicity. But their iconicity does not exhaust their meaning. There is *contained in the very image of the mountains* at once an idea of violence (in part, the trace – i.e. index – of the great geological forces that shaped them) and one of mysterious calm. These semantic values, and the antithesis that they form, are neither symbolised nor represented. They are *there*, immanent in the very image of the mountains that Hockney has extracted from reality, they are *attributes* of that image, alongside its other attributes (secondary qualities). Works of art produce meaning in a similar way to 'primitive' myths. These function at a level where, as Lévi-Strauss writes in *The Raw and the Cooked*: 'logical properties, as attributes of things, will be manifested as directly as flavors or perfumes' (1970: 14; 1964a: 22). Hockney's talent, seen in this light, consists in his ability to paint not only the mountains as he saw them, but a world of ideas immanent to their image. His aesthetic aim, in this connection, recalls that of structuralism, although it is fulfilled in a different way: 'to introduce these secondary qualities into the operations of truth' (1970: 14; 1964a: 22).

LÉVI-STRAUSS, SARTRE AND THE CREATIVE IMAGINATION

The specificity of the theory of the aesthetic image contained in Lévi-Strauss's works may usefully be summed up by means of a contrast with Sartre's phenomenological conception of it in his early work, *L'Imaginaire*. The theory of the work of art expounded in the last pages of *L'Imaginaire* (1940) is based on the more general theory of the imagination to which the rest of this book is devoted. Sartre's aim is to grasp the imagination as a specific faculty, distinct, on the one hand, from the mental representation of perceived objects, in which the mental image is construed as a kind of double of the thing-in-itself, and, on the other, from recollection. Sartre proposes a theory of the imagination that presents it as a particular mode of consciousness. For Sartre, the particularity of the imagined 'object' (an absent friend, for example) is to be found in the special way in which consciousness posits this object (Sartre 2004: 7). Sartre's point is that, contrary to what occurs with 'perceptual consciousness', what he calls 'la conscience imageante', image-making or 'imaging' consciousness (2004: 22), posits its object as non-being. It 'nihilates' its object – 'posits it as unreal' (2004: 191). Image-making consciousness further differs from

perceptual consciousness in that the objects it posits are immediately given for what they are. I do not need to explore an imagined cube mentally to know that it is a cube, and hence that it does indeed have six sides. It follows that imaging consciousness cannot be, for Sartre, a source of knowledge. There is nothing that I can learn from the examination of an imagined cube, in the way that I may from that of a perceived cube, which may turn out not to be a cube at all. The totality of the cube is revealed to me in the act of consciousness that posits it as an image (2004: 9)

The phenomenology of the image that Sartre develops in this early work is predicated on a radical separation of imaging consciousness from perceptual consciousness, the most distinctive feature of the former being its negating or 'derealising' power. In Sartre's own words: 'the object as imaged is an irreality. Without doubt it is present but, at the same time, it is out of reach. I cannot touch it, change its place: or rather I can indeed do so, but on the condition that I do it in an irreal way, renouncing being served by my own hands, resorting to phantom hands . . . to act on these irreal objects, I must duplicate myself, irrealize myself' (2004: 125). One recognises here the self-contained imaginary realm to which the hero of *Nausea* escapes as a cure for his disgust with reality. One further consequence of this mode of existence of imagined images is that they are 'totally *inactive*' and hence are 'final terms, they are never original terms. Even among themselves, they are neither causes nor effects' (2004: 125).

Sartre transposes his theory of the imagined mental image to the work of art more or less unchanged – the principal difference here being that in the case of the work of art, the mental image is attained via an external object – the work of art itself – which he characterises as an 'analogical representative' or *analogon*. The work of art construed as an analogon is no more than the means of generating the true object of the aesthetic experience, which is the *imagined* work of art. Indeed, the aesthetic experience requires a dissolution of the analogon (the material object), which vanishes into an 'abyss' (2004: 189) of nothingness as soon as the imagined object appears. Sartre gives the example of a portrait of Charles VIII. The aesthetic object, he says, is not to be confused with the painting, the aggregate of colours on a canvas: 'So long as we consider the canvas and the frame for themselves, the aesthetic object "Charles VIII" does not appear. It is not that it is hidden by the painting, but that it cannot be given to a realizing consciousness' (2004: 189). This 'realizing consciousness' is the type of consciousness that is characteristic of perception, as opposed to imaging. Sartre continues: 'It appears the moment that consciousness, effecting a radical conversion that requires the nihilation of the world, constitutes itself as

imaging' (2004: 189). It is therefore axiomatic for Sartre that the work of art is an irreal, a 'nothingness': 'the aesthetic object is constituted and apprehended by an imaging consciousness that posits it as irreal' (2004: 191). The aesthetic experience is split into two halves that cannot be joined. The work of art is apprehended either via a 'conscience réalisante', in which case it is not apprehended as a work of art, or via a 'conscience imageante', in which case the work of art appears, but only at the expense of the disappearance of the thing-in-itself. The entering into operation of one kind of consciousness requires a bracketing of the other. Even in the case of non-figurative art and music (2004: 190–3) what is experienced is never what is immediately given to perception, but a phantomatic double of the object. About Beethoven's Seventh Symphony Sartre writes: 'the symphony is *not there*, between those walls, at the tip of the violin bows . . . I do not really hear it, I listen to it in the imaginary' (2004: 192–3). Even in the special case of an aesthetic appreciation of some 'natural' object – a sunset, for example – this object is not apprehended in and for itself. It is not the sunset itself that moves me. I must cease to *perceive* it, so that it becomes its own analogon, giving rise to an imaginary version of itself, and it is this virtual object that is the true source of aesthetic emotion. Sartre enunciates the general rule corresponding to this conception of the work of art as follows: 'the aesthetic enjoyment . . . is nothing but a manner of apprehending the irreal object and, far from being directed on the real painting, it serves to constitute the imaginary object through the real canvas' (2004: 191).

While it is undeniably true that imagining (or imaging) and perceiving are different in certain respects, the lesson of structural anthropology is that they also need to be understood in their interrelations. Lévi-Strauss's anthropological analyses of totemic, mythical and poetic thought reveal the imbrication of the creative imagination and sense perception. As what precedes has shown, for the anthropologist, percepts, images and signs are connected in a single chain of symbolic production. It is worth citing again and now completing Lévi-Strauss's description of the elements of signification used by the *bricoleur* to create symbolic systems: 'Images cannot be ideas but they can play the part of signs or, to be more precise, co-exist with ideas in signs and if ideas are not yet present, they can keep their future place open for them and make its contours apparent negatively. Images are fixed, linked in a single way to the mental act which accompanies them. Signs and images which have acquired significance, may still lack comprehension; unlike concepts they do not yet possess simultaneous and theoretically unlimited relations with other entities of the same kind. They are however already *permutable*' (1966b: 20; 1962b: 34). In the Lévi-Straussian

model of cultural creation, signs are produced by an extraction process, whereby percepts (i.e. non-signifying images) removed from reality are, by stages, converted into signs (i.e. signifying images) and then integrated, by virtue of their substitutability, into broader symbolic systems. There is no radical discontinuity between percepts, mental images and sign systems but rather a progression from one to the other. The 'signifying image' is not defined *in opposition* to the percept. On the contrary, the percept may already imply an idea, call for its presence, present the negative of its contours and, through its union with the percept, form an image. The world of the imaginary is not hermetically sealed off from that of perception. Access to the imaginary requires not the 'nihilation' of reality but on the contrary a delving into it.

Furthermore, if the image is not itself a source of knowledge, as Sartre argues, Lévi-Strauss shows that for the mind in its 'wild' modes of operating – which include aesthetic creation – it may be a *tool* of understanding. As I have already mentioned in chapter 2, Lévi-Strauss sums up his response to Malinowski's functionalism by saying that plants are not only good to eat, but 'good to think with'. Lévi-Strauss's theory of signification invests the aesthetic image itself – for Sartre, the material entity functioning as analogon – with a potentiality and efficacy that early existentialist thought denies it. The meaning of the aesthetic object is sought *in* the body of the image, as indeed is the grammar whereby cultures produce symbolic systems. The Cunas differentiate kinds of leaves on the basis of how they are folded by the wind and possess fourteen verbs to describe the movements of an alligator's head. The Blackfoot are able to forecast the arrival of spring by observing the evolution of the foetuses of bison. From a structural perspective, one of the defining characteristics of the human mind, grasped in its 'wild' modes of operating, is precisely its sustained interest in the minute observation of concrete reality, an 'interest' that is integral to any kind of imaginary or symbolic production. Paul Klee's dictum about the modern artist applies equally well to the 'primitive' scientist: 'the dialogue with nature remains, for the artists, the *sine qua non* condition' (Klee 2002: 43). And it is indeed this dialogue that Lévi-Strauss places at the very heart of all symbolic production, which in this sense is the very opposite of a 'derealising' force. In Lévi-Strauss's own words: 'savage thought is definable both by a consuming symbolic ambition such as humanity has never again seen rivalled, and by scrupulous attention directed entirely towards the concrete, and finally by the implicit conviction that these two attitudes are but one . . .' (1966b: 220; 1962b: 263).⁷

⁷ For an attempt at reconciling structuralism and existentialism, see Caws 1992.

Structuralism, Symbolist poetics and abstract art

In the preceding chapter I have considered the implications of the connection made by Lévi-Strauss between art and so-called ‘wild’ thinking for a theory of the *production* of the aesthetic sign and what this connection tells us about some of art’s modes of signification. The lesson of structuralism, here, is that in addition to any denotative or referential function, the aesthetic sign *mediates* between mind and world. The aesthetic sign is not – or is not only – that which figures or more generally ‘points’ to the world; it is constitutive of a particular experience of it. The world is not apprehended *in* a work of art, but *through* it. In this chapter, I would like to look more closely at the implications of Lévi-Strauss’s understanding of the functioning of concrete logic for a theory of the ‘consumption’ of the aesthetic sign. To do this, I will examine an aspect of the genealogy of structuralism, whose importance for a general understanding of Lévi-Strauss’s works has already been demonstrated by James Boon in *From Symbolism to Structuralism: Lévi-Strauss in a Literary Tradition*. As Boon realised very well, structuralism is deeply connected to the current of ideas in French culture that led from Baudelaire to the Symbolist and post-Symbolist poets. He shows that one of the dominant paradigms of twentieth-century anthropological theory originated, in part at least, in a literary movement. In this chapter, I would like to revisit this literary connection, whose importance is arguably not fully grasped by Boon’s study, and explore what more it can tell us about the relevance of structural anthropology for aesthetics. Viewing Lévi-Strauss’s works in the light of their Symbolist antecedents brings to the fore some aesthetically valuable ideas contained in them that might otherwise be overlooked. And it does so in a way that reveals a tension, perhaps even contradiction, between different parts of Lévi-Strauss’s thought: his anthropological theorisation of concrete logic and his ‘art-historical’ discourse about modern art and, in particular, abstract art. In short, one may use the theory of concrete logic to explain one way in which abstract art produces meaningful ‘messages’ – how it

succeeds, despite the absence of figuration, in elevating itself above mere decoration to 'signify'. This is in direct contradiction with Lévi-Strauss's vigorous critique of abstract art (1969b: 65–87; 1961: 81–104; 1970: 21; 1964a: 29), his attempt to construct an argument that denies abstract art, a priori, a legitimate claim to meaningfulness, condemning it to being no more than 'a gratuitous playing about with artistic languages' (1969b: 77; 1961: 94). I will try to show here, by means of a genealogical exploration of some of the connections that link structuralism to Symbolist poetics, that one may find in one part of Lévi-Strauss's works (anthropological) the conceptual tools that enable one to get beyond the limiting ideas expressed in another ('art-historical'). Concrete logic – beyond its anthropological uses – provides a way out of the semiotic impasse in which Lévi-Strauss places abstract art in the Charbonnier interviews and the 'Overture' to *The Raw and the Cooked*.

In this respect, I concur with Georges Roque's rejection in *Qu'est-ce que l'art abstrait?* (2003) of the structuralist critique of abstract art. However, I believe that the reasons Roque puts forward for doing so, in particular in his chapter VIII ('May One Speak of Signs?'), are the wrong ones, and are based, in part at least, on misreadings of Lévi-Strauss's works. More important in the context of the present chapter, Roque does not see the valuable insights that Lévi-Strauss's anthropological analysis of concrete logic provides for an understanding of an abstract pictorial language – a 'grammar of line and colour', as Roque puts it. Where Roque's otherwise illuminating book confirms the argument put forward here is in its detailed analysis of all that abstract painting owes to the Symbolist movement, a movement of which Lévi-Strauss is also, in part, a product.

CORRESPONDANCES

There is at the very core of structuralism a set of ideas whose origin may be traced to the new conception of poetry articulated by Baudelaire in the middle of the nineteenth century, one of the principal sources of modern French poetry in general and Symbolism in particular.¹ The Baudelairean 'imaginative' artist is a proto-bricoleur. 'It [the imagination] decomposes all creation, and with the raw materials accumulated and disposed in accordance with the rules whose origins one cannot find save in the furthest depth of the soul, it creates a new world' (1965b: 156). He/she does not imitate nature, like the realist. Nature is a mere 'dictionary' in which the artist finds the 'words' with which to construct phrases but never the

¹ For a study of this poetic genealogy see Raymond 1961.

phrases themselves (Baudelaire borrows the metaphor from Delacroix). This is also how Lévi-Strauss presents the 'primitive' scientist in *The Savage Mind*. The latter observes the natural world – the differences between plant or animal species, for example – and extracts from it certain distinctive features that he/she will then make operative within a symbolic system. For 'wild' thinking, nature is also essentially a 'dictionary'.

One of the central tenets of structuralism is that we should not be studying objects so much as the relationships between objects. This basic structuralist principle informs the whole of Lévi-Strauss's distinctive approach to culture. Kinship systems, myths, totemic classifications are all seen as relational structures. As he puts it in an early programmatic essay: 'as soon as the various aspects of social life . . . are expressed as relationships, anthropology will become a general theory of relationships' (1963a: 95; 1958: 110). This founding principle of structuralism is generally presented by Lévi-Strauss and his commentators as having been adapted from structural linguistics, which shows that phonemes do not have an individual positive identity but are defined by the system of oppositions that relates them to the other phonemes of the sound system to which they belong. Their value is purely 'negative' or 'contrastive'. Lévi-Strauss construes the role of the anthropologist as being analogous to that of the linguist: to uncover the systems of relationships that, at a level equivalent to that of 'langue', structure the various symbolic systems that make up culture.

Beyond linguistics one may trace this core structuralist idea to Baudelaire's conception of the 'imaginative artist', in many ways a literary alter-ego of the structural anthropologist. Chief among the qualities that Baudelaire requires of the 'imaginative' artist is an ability to perceive not only objects in the outside world, but the hidden relationships between those objects – what he calls *correspondances*. The role that Baudelaire assigns to the imagination in poetic invention parallels that of the intellect in the structuralist act of interpretation. As the poet writes, summing up the structural method a century before its invention: 'The whole visible universe is but a storehouse of images and signs *to which the imagination will give a relative place and value*; it is a sort of pasture which the imagination must digest and transform' (1965b: 161–2, my italics). And for Baudelaire, as for Lévi-Strauss, understanding or perceiving the hidden relations between things is the means of gaining access to a hidden order or unity.

It is here, however, that Lévi-Strauss differs fundamentally from Baudelaire. The latter's *correspondances* are at once horizontal and vertical, in other words they are immanent to nature (horizontal), but also connect (vertically) the world of visible things to their counterparts in the 'world of

the spirit'. One may recognise, here, the influence of Swedenborg's mysticism on Baudelaire. For Baudelaire, what, in the final analysis, guarantees the unity of the sensible world, and by extension explains that all things correspond, must be sought out in a metaphysical realm. As he puts it: 'things have always found their expression through a system of reciprocal analogy ever since the day when God uttered the world like a complex and indivisible statement' (2003b: 115).² For Lévi-Strauss, on the contrary, it is the patterning agency of the mind, itself construed as part of nature, that explains the unity of the phenomenal world and its hidden correlations. Baudelaire's hidden 'order' becomes in Lévi-Strauss's thought a 'system' whose origin is no longer divine but cognitive. Lévi-Strauss's vision of nature as a 'huge semantic field' (1981: 689; 1971a: 616) recalls Baudelaire's own 'forest of symbols', but does not carry the same metaphysical implication, although one may perhaps, at times, wonder to what extent the traces of a form of idealism may still be visible in Lévi-Strauss's thought, despite his systematic opposition to idealism. For Lévi-Strauss there is no 'world of the spirit', but there is a 'mind' – in French 'esprit' – which, although emphatically construed in materialist terms, may sometimes fulfil, at least at a mytho-poetic level of reading, a different role, closer to that of the fabled ghost in the machine.³

SYMBOLISM AS EXPRESSION

Lévi-Strauss's understanding of concrete logic, as the preceding connections with Baudelaire confirm, is rooted in a certain shift in aesthetic thought about the nature of artistic symbols that occurs during the nineteenth century. Baudelaire's theory of *correspondances* is the basis of a theory of poetic signification, which is itself representative of much broader historical transformations in sensibility which prepared the advent of modern French poetry. In short, this shift – a gradual change of emphasis more than a radical departure – consists in a move away from a conception of the artistic symbol rooted in convention in favour of a foregrounding of the *inherent expressiveness* of colour and form. Such a conception of the

² As Claude Pichois points out, Baudelaire's transcendental realm is not always invested with spiritual connotations. In the sonnet 'Correspondances', there is a 'beyond', but it is more sacred than divine. Here, the poet is concerned with the metaphysical, in a literal sense of the term, rather than the mystical (Pichois 1975: 843–4).

³ The phrase was used derisively by Gilbert Ryle about the Cartesian conception of the relation between body and mind. This is not the place for a discussion of the nature of the agency that Lévi-Strauss attributes to 'l'esprit', which would warrant a separate study.

artistic symbol already existed in earlier periods, but it was not until the nineteenth century that, as art historian Moshe Barasch shows (2000: 146–283), it became relatively dominant. And Baudelaire was one of its best-known exponents. His vision of a sensible world in which all things are interconnected is integral to his understanding of this expressive power of symbols.

In previous epochs, in particular the Renaissance and medieval times, the dominant conception of the artistic symbol was one in which the meaning of symbols was construed as being dependent on culturally transmitted knowledge ('common ground'), knowledge that often had a textual basis, such as biblical or mythological. In other words, symbols derived their meaning principally from implicitly shared codes, conventions or narratives that were, in a sense, independent from the symbol itself. Van Issenrandt's 1551 *Madonna and Child*, currently at the Bowes Museum, provides a good example of this kind of symbolism. In it, the Madonna is holding a red rose in full bloom, which symbolises love, beauty and prosperity. The Christ holds a white rose, which signifies purity. The two roses jointly signify unity and togetherness. Such symbols may be complex to interpret and ambiguous. They do not imply a fixed meaning. Furthermore, Van Issenrandt's painting works at other levels than its codified symbolic content. Nevertheless, it illustrates very well a certain reliance on a mode of symbolisation that is essentially conventional. The red and white roses could have been listed in an encyclopedia of visual symbols. Writing in the middle of the eighteenth century, Johann Winckelmann, one of the founders of art history, still saw the compilation of such an encyclopedia as one of the main tasks of the art historian (Barasch 2000: 226).

The shift of emphasis towards the inherent expressiveness of artistic 'symbols' that occurred during the nineteenth century was no doubt in part a product of the development of experimental science and what it discovered about the physics of colour and sound. Colour was shown to possess a 'grammar' of its own. Isaac Newton's (1642–1726) demonstration that white light diffracted in a prism was comprised of several coloured rays opened the way for the nineteenth-century theorisation of this 'grammar' of colour. The opacity of the sensible world started to melt away, revealing its hidden structures, sometimes compared to a natural alphabet. Goethe, opposing Newton, argued that it is the opposition between light and dark that should be taken as fundamental, and that yellow is closest to white and blue to black. He presented colours as the product of a dynamic tension between light and dark (see his *Theory of Colours*). A few years later,

Michel-Eugène Chevreul, the Gobelins factory dye specialist, author of *The Laws of Contrast of Colour* (1839) which was to have great influence on French painting from Delacroix to Manet and Delaunay, identified three kinds of colour contrasts: simultaneous (when two neighbouring colours influence one another), successive (when we perceive as an 'after-image' the complementary colour to the one we are observing) and mixed (when the 'after-image' generated by one colour interacts with another adjacent to it). These examples already contain in them the seeds of a characteristically structuralist vision of the world. In each of these cases one may see how a theory of the *relations between chromatic values* suggests new possibilities for the development of a relatively autonomous pictorial language (Buvat 2003: 17–18). The other key nineteenth-century scientific discovery to have deeply changed the conception of the nature of artistic symbols was that colour and sound were both made up of waves. This opened up the possibility of their mutual translation and, by extension, the ideal of a 'total' work of art that would involve all the senses, which was pursued by Baudelaire, Wagner, Kandinsky, Kupka and others (Ramos 2003: 26).

Artistic images started to signify not so much by virtue of their codified symbolic content but by virtue of inherent qualities they possessed that had a power to 'move'. This is apparent in the aesthetics of Romantic landscape painting, which became, in Barasch's words, 'an art of producing moods' (2000: 249). In his discussion of landscape painting in his 1859 *Salon* Baudelaire comments: 'Any landscape-painter who does not know how to convey a *feeling* by means of an assemblage of vegetable or mineral matter, is no artist' (1965b: 194).

With the Romantics, the meaning and power of artistic symbols becomes firmly rooted in the visual (or auditory) experience itself, in other words a personal experience *grasped in terms of the psychology of perception*, as opposed to a coded language whose deciphering requires culturally shared knowledge. The distinction, however, is one of degree, since there is no 'pure' or 'natural' symbol that completely escapes cultural codification. Perception itself, anthropology has taught us, is, in part at least, a culturally determined phenomenon.

We are now in a better position to understand the full importance of the connections between Lévi-Strauss and Baudelaire outlined above. Baudelaire was one of the most influential theoreticians and practitioners of symbolic expression. He founded a whole aesthetics and a poetics on the principle of the *direct* translatability of sensory experiences – their translatability into one another (= synaesthesia) and into ideas. Put differently, he realised the centrality for art of the correspondences that the

imagination 'naturally' establishes between certain sensations and certain ideas or moods. And he believed that such correspondences – which provided him with a new principle of aesthetic creation and perception – were not arbitrary but occurred according to certain laws, albeit the undiscovered laws of a 'rhétorique profonde' (1975: 185). It is this aesthetic doctrine, in many ways a revolutionary one – abstraction may be seen as a logical elaboration of it – that he sums up when he writes in his seminal *Salon de 1859*: 'It is Imagination that first taught man the moral meaning of colour, of contour, of sound and of scent' (1965b: 156). Baudelaire's analysis of the use of colour in painting in the 1859 *Salon* is particularly revealing of his conception of artistic expression:

Just as a dream inhabits its own proper atmosphere, so a conception which has become a composition needs to move within a coloured setting which is peculiar to itself. Obviously a particular tone is allotted to whichever part of a picture is to become the key and to govern the others. Everyone knows that yellow, orange and red inspire and express the ideas of joy, richness, glory and love: but there are thousands of different yellow or red atmospheres, and all the colours will be affected logically and to a proportionate degree by the atmosphere which dominates. In certain of its aspects the art of the colourist has an evident affinity with mathematics and music. (1965b: 160)

When Baudelaire comments that everyone knows that 'yellow, orange and red inspire and express the ideas of joy, richness, glory and love', he appears still to be invoking, in part at least, an older, pre-Romantic conception of symbolism reliant primarily on culturally shared, coded knowledge. What follows, however, discovers, in colour, in its inherent 'musicality', the principles of an expressiveness that has become emancipated from such knowledge. An encyclopedia of visual symbols might include an entry for the colour red but not for a thousand different shades of red. More important still in the present context is the fact that the colourist's art, as understood by Baudelaire, is tributary to a mathematics, which directly prefigures Lévi-Strauss's own '*logic* of sensible qualities' which one may view as a modern-day version of Baudelaire's 'moral meaning of colour'.

Form, for Baudelaire, was not simply the hand maiden of content, but the means of independently evoking in the viewer, in particular by the establishment of synaesthetic associations, a series of definite ideas or emotions, *and of doing so as surely and as precisely as by means of the written word*. As he puts it in his essay on Wagner's *Tannhäuser*: 'what would be truly surprising would be to find that sound *could not* suggest colour, that colours could not evoke the idea of a melody, and that sound and colour

were unsuitable for the translation of ideas, seeing that things have always found their expression through a system of reciprocal analogy' (2003b: 115). As Richard Sieburth astutely remarks, much of Baudelaire's writings on art consist in meditations on the theme of translation (2001: 790). About the greatness of one of his own predecessors, Baudelaire wrote: 'Victor Hugo's verse is capable of translating for the human soul not only the most direct pleasures derived from visible nature, but, in addition, the most fugitive, the most complicated, the most moral sensations (it is deliberately that I say moral sensations) that are transmitted to us by the visible world, by inanimate nature or so-called inanimate nature' (1976: 132, my translation). Lévi-Strauss's 'logic of sensible qualities' is none other than an anthropological theory about the role of 'translations' of this kind in cultural creation. What is of further relevance in this context is that this conception of colour already contains in it the possibility of abstract art. If the colours used in the nineteenth century to depict objects possess an inherent expressiveness, it becomes possible to imagine that those colours may continue to fulfil the same function once detached from the objects that they represent, as Roque indeed has shown. The Symbolists treated words as plastic entities, they discovered in their sound-texture significations that could be *abstracted* from their semantic content. Roque shows that this was an important precedent for the pioneers of abstract art in their quest for a pictorial language independent from figuration. He reveals, for example, the importance of the references to Maeterlinck in Kandinsky's early theoretical writings. One might also have cited here Mallarmé's famous complaint, in *Divagation*, that the sound values of the words 'jour' and 'nuit' are the wrong way round, the former invoking heaviness when it should be light, the latter lightness when it should be heavy (Lévi-Strauss provides his own set of phonetico-semantic associations on these two words in *The View from Afar*⁴). The dissociation of the signifying potential of the sound-texture of words from their semantic content, epitomised by Mallarmé's complaint, already contains in it, although in a different sensory register, the conditions of possibility of abstract art.

The aim of this schematic outline of a certain shift in conceptions of the artistic symbol is to try to bring to light more clearly what structural anthropology owes to nineteenth-century aesthetic thought, whose problems, a century later, it may still be seen to be working through: among the main, how certain sensory experiences, such as the apprehension of different shades of red, may induce similar ideas in different minds. I am

⁴ See 1987b: 147; 1983: 200.

paraphrasing here a formula used by Baudelaire in his famous essay on *Tannhäuser* where he writes that 'true music evokes analogous ideas in different brains' (2003b: 115). It is no coincidence that Lévi-Strauss cites this phrase in one of his key aesthetic texts, the 'Overture' to the *Mythologiques* (1970: 26; 1964a: 35) discreetly sign-posting the connections that link Baudelaire's thinking to his own.⁵ These connections lie at the very core of structural anthropology, since Lévi-Strauss's specific claim is that his conception of myth is modelled on Baudelaire's conception of music.

Baudelaire compares three evocations of the prelude to *Lohengrin*, his own, the one contained in the programme of the 1860 concert he attended at the Théâtre des Italiens, and another by Franz Liszt. What is proto-structuralist about Baudelaire's essay is that it reduces these three seemingly different evocations of a piece of music to a small number of recurring traits. It shows that beyond the diversity of semantic contents attributed to the piece of music by each listener, these crystallise, as it were, in a shared mental structure. This 'profound' (1970: 26; 1964a: 34–5) insight about the nature of music may be seen to be the basis of Lévi-Strauss's argument that music and 'primitive' myths are 'isomorphic', an argument that, in many ways, is at the very origin of the whole project of the *Mythologiques*, itself a reduction of hundreds of Amerindian myths to a small number of recurring mental structures.

Baudelaire uses the phrase to characterise the effect of 'true' music, about which he also says that it should suggest ideas that are 'related to those that inspired the artist' (2003b: 114). But Baudelaire makes clear that his discussion of music relates to art in general, or at least 'imaginative', i.e. 'expressive', art. Transposed into a visual register, Baudelaire's insight into the intelligibility of music may be seen as sufficient grounds for founding an abstract aesthetic, i.e. for theorising the basis of a *stable* abstract visual language. Abstract art may also be viewed in terms of the 'crystallisation' in a single structure of the experiences of different viewers, which thereby become translatable into one another. The possibility of such a translation is arguably what differentiates abstract art from mere decorative patterns, which give rise to a multitude of subjective responses that are, in principle, irreducible to one another. And, despite Lévi-Strauss's anti-modernism, his logic of sensible qualities does indeed provide a key to how this 'translation' process at the core of abstract art might work, or at least work in certain

⁵ He alludes to the phrase on at least three other occasions: the *Conversations* with Charbonnier (1991b: 142; 1988a: 197), *The Naked Man* (1971a: 580; 1981: 649) and the 'Preface' to Jakobson's *Six leçons sur le son et le sens* (1976: 16–17).

cases, since there are, in fact, many different abstract languages (my focus here will be on the earliest forms of abstraction).

A TRAIN JOURNEY

To flesh this proposition out, we need to consider more closely the textual evidence for the genealogy of structuralism that I have been outlining in this chapter, which, as we shall see, provides a vital clue to how one might apply concrete logic to a deciphering of the language of abstract art. One passage in particular stands out. One needs to turn, here, to Lévi-Strauss's earliest intimations of a concrete logic, which, as Claude Imbert has recognised with clairvoyance, occurs in *Tristes Tropiques*. As she puts it in 'Qualia': 'As for the positive reasons that were finally to bring about a logic of sensible qualities, they were put to the test throughout the four volumes of the *Mythologiques* and *The Way of the Masks*. But the determining motives of this logic are already present in *Tristes Tropiques* and its principles well explored in *The Savage Mind* (Imbert 2004: 434, my translation).⁶ This is no doubt in part because concrete logic is deeply rooted in the multitude of sensory shocks that characterised Lévi-Strauss's first contact with the New World.

Before quoting this passage, arguably among the most important for an understanding of Lévi-Strauss's anthropological project (where it came from and where it was heading), it is necessary to set it in its context. It concludes a series of philosophical speculations provoked by the recollection of a train journey undertaken by Lévi-Strauss in 1935, during the course of his first ethnographic field trip.

A British company had obtained from the Brazilian government the right to construct a railway line that was to cross the states of São Paulo and Parana. In 1935 large parts of these regions were largely unexplored. Lévi-Strauss's journey along this railway line, whilst it was still under construction, provided him with an opportunity to observe the birth and development of a series of new towns. These were being implanted at regular intervals along the railway line. The oldest towns were at the start of the line, the most recent at its terminal point. At the time of Lévi-Strauss's trip, the last town to have been implanted, Arapongas, had only one inhabitant. The journey to the end of the line was the means of a journey in time, likely to appeal to the structuralist imagination. Each stop revealed

⁶ Imbert's article is in large part a discussion of the nature of this 'test' and its broader philosophical implications.

an earlier stage in the evolution followed by each town, thus laying bare the 'mysterious formative powers' (1963b: 125; 1955a: 136) that seem to have guided the hands of those who built them.

For, although these adventurers-builders were working without plans, far from developing ad hoc, these towns appear to have developed according to precise rules. For example, in each of them, the streets that ran parallel to the line were devoted to commerce, those that were perpendicular to it, to housing. The peripheral zones were reserved for one kind of activity (individual) whereas the central zones were devoted to another (group activities). Furthermore, all of the towns developed along an east-west axis, a phenomenon that Lévi-Strauss explains in terms of an unconscious association of the 'direction' of progress with that of the course of the sun. In other words, the organisation of urban space was grounded in a small number of structural oppositions, such as that between 'parallel' and 'perpendicular', 'peripheral' and 'central' or 'east' and 'west'.

Lévi-Strauss's hypothesis of a correlation between the orientation of the course of the sun and the orientation of the towns is of particular interest here. He does not attribute this correlation to some long defunct sun cult, or to mystical ideas, but to an unconscious 'logic', in effect a 'concrete logic', the same logic that, in another context, explains why the hands of a clock travelling clockwise are often thought to be travelling in the 'right' direction and those travelling anti-clockwise the 'wrong' direction, or that even numbers are perceived to be 'positive' perhaps even 'good' and odd numbers 'negative' or 'sinister'. The project of structural anthropology is based on the intuition that this logic can be explained and even formalised.⁷ Far from being irrational, these associations are the basis of an elementary 'wisdom'. The madness, Lévi-Strauss claims, lies in our modern wish to go against this wisdom (1963b: 126; 1955: 137) rooted in a qualitative, as opposed to Euclidian, conception of space. And it is here that the crucial passage mentioned above occurs. He concludes his speculations about the formation of the new towns as follows (the significance of the passage is such that it is worth quoting in full):

These primitive peoples attained quickly and easily to a peace of mind which we strive for at the cost of innumerable rebuffs and irritations. We should do better to accept the true conditions of our human experience and realize that it is not within our power to emancipate ourselves completely from either its structure or its

⁷ In the context of the preceding parallels between Baudelaire and Lévi-Strauss, it is revealing that the latter should compare towns specifically to musical creations. They are, as he puts it, 'objects of the same kind' (1963b: 127; 1955a: 138).

natural rhythms. Space has values peculiar to itself, just as sounds and scents have their colours and feelings their weight. The search for correspondences of this sort is not a poets' game or a department of mystification, as people have dared to say of Rimbaud's sonnet 'Voyelles': that sonnet is now indispensable to the student of language who knows the basis, not of the colour of [phonemes], for this varies with each individual, but of the relation which unites one [phoneme] to another and comprises a limited gamut of possibilities. These correspondences offer the scholar an entirely new terrain, and one which may still have rich yields to offer. If fish can make an aesthetic distinction between smells in terms of light and dark, and bees classify the strength of light in terms of weight – darkness is heavy, to them, and bright light light – just so should the work of the painter, the poet, and the composer and the myths and symbols of primitive Man seem to us: if not a superior form of knowledge, at any rate as the most fundamental form of knowledge, and the only one that we all have in common; knowledge in the scientific sense is merely the sharpened edge of this other knowledge. (1963b: 126–7; 1955a: 137–8)⁸

The importance of this passage derives first of all from its date. It was published in 1955, seven years before *The Savage Mind*, the book in which Lévi-Strauss first introduced the concepts of 'concrete logic', 'logic of sensible qualities' and 'pensée sauvage'. It looks forwards towards this work, and beyond it to the series of the *Mythologiques* (1964–71). It was not until the latter work that Lévi-Strauss would finally write the detailed grammar of concrete logic. But, through a series of partly veiled inter-textual allusions, it also looks backwards, to Baudelaire's poetic theory of *correspondances*, to Rimbaud's sonnet 'Voyelles' (his own poetic reworking of Baudelaire's theory), and to Mallarmé and the complaint already mentioned above that the sound values of 'jour' and 'nuit' are the wrong way round. It provides, in other words, the missing link between a certain genealogy of Symbolist poetics and structuralism. The 'quest' for correspondences between perfumes, colours and sounds, we are told, is more than a poet's game. It is the key to a universal mode of thought – he will later say, *wild* mode of thought – and by extension to the anthropologist's very understanding of what culture is. In the light of this passage, one may see concrete logic as a transformation of Baudelaire's theory of the imagination. It is a poetic theory of 'correspondences' elevated to the rank of a general theory of cultural production. One can see, here, to what extent aesthetic and poetic ideas are at the very source of structural anthropology. It is worth noting as well that in as much as the basic mechanisms of production of meaning are anticipated in the structures of perception of

⁸ This crucial passage is mistranslated by John Russel who wrongly translates the French 'phonème' as 'phenomena'.

fish and bees, they pre-date the emergence of language. Structuralism discovers something more archaic, that one may construe as a substratum to ulterior systems of signification. The conditions of possibility of Baudelaire's poetic correspondences, and more generally of symbolic expression, are already written into the biochemical functioning of the brains and sensory organs of all living beings.

SYNAESTHESIA

As I mentioned above, if I have cited this key passage, it is a means to an end: to grasp the relevance of concrete logic for an understanding of abstract art. The allusion to Rimbaud's sonnet 'Voyelles' deserves, in this connection, closer attention. It is a more or less universally ignored fact that Lévi-Strauss offers, in the above passage, an explanation of how coloured audition works, and one that may be applied to synaesthetic phenomena as a whole (he will reiterate this solution nearly forty years later in *Look Listen Read*, which in itself is indicative of its significance in the development of his thought). For one of the enigmatic features of synaesthesia is that, within a given cultural group, the kinds of associations made by different subjects occur according to statistically verifiable recurring patterns. As Jakobson explains: 'when we ask whether /i/ or /u/ is darker, testing such phonic oppositions as grave vs. acute, some of the subjects may respond that this question makes no sense to them but hardly one will state that /i/ is the darker of the two' (1981: 44). Given the importance of this phenomenon for the pioneers of abstract art, Lévi-Strauss's hypothesis about how it works is worth a closer look.

Lévi-Strauss's premise is that coloured audition cannot be explained in terms of one-to-one correlations between sounds and colours. As he puts it: '*Voyelles* is not primarily an illustration of "colored hearing." As Castel would have understood, *the sonnet is based on the homologies perceived between the differences*' (1997: 138; 1993a: 134, my italics). What does this mean?

Although colour symbolism is in certain respects culturally determined, what Lévi-Strauss is suggesting is universal is the perception of structural similarities between, on the one hand, the structure of the chromatic scale – or rather *a* chromatic scale, since different cultures construct different chromatic scales – and, on the other, *a* phonetic scale, or, indeed, *a* scale of musical tones (in Western culture, let us say the diatonic scale). Thus, colour associations may vary, but they do so within certain structural parameters that are the same for the colour scale, the phonetic scale and

the musical scale. It is no coincidence that Newton resorted to a musical analogy in his own analysis of the colour spectrum. In other words, the key to the attribution of semantic values to colours or any other sensory stimuli is to be found in the establishment of a homology between two or more systems of relations – or rather, more precisely, two or more systems of differences, that between front and back vowels and that between light and dark colours. In the first instance, these systems of differences are perceived only in the sensible realm of colour and sound. But the implication of Lévi-Strauss's argument is that certain *semantic* values may become attached to them. The process is similar to the one already evoked above with respect to Baudelaire's theory of music: the 'crystallisation' of an experience in a common mental structure. The process of correlation is one in which sensible homologies are meshed with intelligible ones.

Lévi-Strauss is not saying that certain associations between sounds and colours are universal, fixed once and for all, as if hard-wired into the brain. The recurrence of sound–colour associations is a corollary of similarities between the structure of the sound continuum and that of the colour continuum, similarities that are perceived at once by the senses *and* the mind. As Lévi-Strauss comments: 'It is not the immediately perceived sensory correspondences that reveal the sonnet's architecture, but the relations between these correspondences as established unconsciously by the understanding' (1997: 138; 1993a: 135).

STRUCTURALISM AND ABSTRACT ART

In this context, Lévi-Strauss's well-known critique of abstract art appears as something of a paradox, since his theory of a logic of sensible properties, taken here in its most basic, i.e. analogical, mode of operation (the *Mythologiques* will later reveal the full complexity of this logic) provides a solution to one of the fundamental problems faced by this art form from its very inception, namely how to attain signification whilst renouncing figuration. I will analyse in more detail in chapter 6 Lévi-Strauss's theory of the relation between different art forms, which in part founds his refusal to see abstract art as anything but a destruction of painting. The key point to make here is that Lévi-Strauss requires that art, like natural languages, possess two levels of articulation. His argument is that different art forms, like any natural language, possess elementary units of signification – musical notes, line and colour, shapes, etc. – which have, in themselves, an organised character (a musical scale is a system of relative values, colours may be organised into tonal scales) and which the artist further combines to create

those higher-level organised systems that are works of art. By turning its back on reality, abstract painting allegedly renounces its primary level of organisation, the natural world from which it extracts its elementary units of signification (because music finds its primary level units of signification in culture – musical scales are artefacts – it is not similarly constrained).⁹

Contrary to the general thrust of Lévi-Strauss's critique of abstraction, his own theory of a logic that adheres *directly* to sensible qualities – a concrete logic – may be seen to provide a basis for abstract art's claim to constitute a genuine artistic language. What explains the ability of abstract art to attain signification, whilst renouncing figuration, concrete logic suggests, is an attribute of mental functioning that structural anthropology posits as universal (it is the key to totemism as well as the genesis of myths), namely a 'natural' tendency of the human mind to establish homologies between sets of differences – i.e. a natural tendency to construct sequences of the type $A : B :: C : D$, which one may read as *A differs* from *B*, such as *C differs* from *D*. According to Aristotle, this is essentially the formula of

⁹ Roque attributes to Lévi-Strauss the view that 'musical sounds are a cultural elaboration of something given in nature, i.e. noise' (2003: 298, my translation). Lévi-Strauss's conception is, in fact, the reverse of this, his point being that music originates in culture – it starts as a cultural invention (musical scales, like instruments, are human inventions) and ends up as sound. This is the opposite of painting, which, according to Lévi-Strauss, starts with a natural given, colour, which it then culturally transforms. What differentiates the painter from the composer is not the fact that the former *directly* transposes colours found in nature to his/her canvas whereas the latter operates a conversion of a natural given, ideas that Roque wrongly attributes to Lévi-Strauss. It is the nature of the primary materials used by each. Music starts with intelligible structures (belonging to culture) which are given life as sensible entities (sounds/nature), whereas painting starts with sensible material (colours given in nature) which it converts into something intelligible (an aesthetic *sign*/cultural object). Other deficiencies in Roque's account of Lévi-Strauss's ideas suggest a superficial reading, although his book is in many other respects enlightening. Roque is of the opinion that Lévi-Strauss 'subordinates the sensible to the intelligible, matter to mind, form to content, in short the signifier to the signified' (2003: 302, my translation). This caricature is inaccurate. On the contrary, Lévi-Strauss's originality lies in his discovery of a logic that is immanent to sensible reality ('concrete logic') and in his endeavour to reconcile the sensible and the intelligible (see chapter 3). Roque also simplifies to excess Lévi-Strauss's understanding of the notion of mimesis, whose purpose is not to reproduce an identical image of a real object but rather, *through* its representation, to try and *render visible* structures that are otherwise concealed in the real object (see chapter 5). Finally, what Roque fundamentally objects to is that Lévi-Strauss makes the *linguistic* principle of duality of patterning a precondition of the production of meaning in art. As Roque himself shows very well, Kandinsky and Klee did indeed conceive of abstract art as an aesthetic language that combines elementary units (lines, points, planes, etc.) into higher-order systems. I find this notion less problematic than Lévi-Strauss's assimilation of painting's primary level of articulation with the organisation of the sensible world into *objects*. Even according to the terms of Lévi-Strauss's own argument it would be possible to attribute duality of patterning (in many ways, a useful concept) to the abstract works of, say, Jackson Pollock or Mark Rothko, which are indeed in touch with sensible reality, a reality of colours, forms and textures that provide the elements of a primary level of articulation independent from specific objects. In certain of its forms, abstract art is a new realism.

metaphorical thinking. This is what I take to be the more general aesthetic lesson of Lévi-Strauss's theory of coloured audition.

Kandinsky recognised that forms, whether geometrical or not, and colours possess their own 'internal resonance' (1970: 47). For example, he saw different kinds of triangles – pointed, flat, equilateral – as 'spiritual beings', each with its own identity, its own 'tone' (or 'perfume'), whose distinctiveness manifests itself when it is placed next to other shapes. The 'resonance' of each pictorial element – the distinct 'tone' it emits or, in structuralist terminology, its semantic value – may be modified (modulated) either by modifying the form or colour itself (a point can be given a jagged edge, for example, a colour made lighter or darker) or by juxtaposing it with other pictorial elements. There are no 'pure' tones in abstract art, since pictorial elements, such as the point – 'inwardly the most concise form' (Kandinsky 1982: 546) – must be considered in relation to other elements. The 'resonance' of the point, which Kandinsky characterises, amongst other things, in terms of its immobility, is not the same if it appears alone on the pictorial plane or together with a line, the trail left by a point in movement (1982: 572). The mobile line alters the immobile point, indeed comes about by the destruction of the 'self-contained repose of the point' (572).

Kandinsky's elementary grammar of colour and form may be seen to constitute, in its own way, something like a concrete logic. Immanent relations between pictorial elements serve as the basis for a semantic system which is, as it were, mapped onto these relations. According to Kandinsky, this abstract pictorial language is not particular to abstract art. All painting, including figurative, involves formal compositions that make use of geometrical forms, such as the triangle – see the arrangement of the five figures in Raphael's *Holy Family* (Kandinsky 1970: 54) – that form part of an underlying abstract system of signification. At the time of writing *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky did not yet think it possible for the artist to do away entirely with figuration, in part because of the need to give the viewing public time to learn the language of abstraction (1970: 50–1).¹⁰

¹⁰ Kandinsky argues that certain 'objects' may hinder the manifestation of the inner resonance of pure form and colour. Generally, the lesser the importance attributed to the figurative elements of a painting, the more clearly the *inner* resonance of the abstract elements are heard (1970: 49). Kandinsky cites, here, the case of Cézanne's use of a triangular composition in *Bathers* in which the painter has distorted the human figures so that they seem to extend towards the point of the triangle, 'driven upwards, as it were, becoming ever lighter and more expansive' (1970: 49). Here, the triangle is not used artificially to give unity to the composition (= academicism) but becomes,

Baudelaire, before Kandinsky, recognised the expressive power of 'pure' form, i.e. of the formal elements of a work of art considered in and for themselves, independently from their figurative or denotative function. He recognised it in painting (in particular Delacroix) and also poetry. As he puts it, in an evocation of different kinds of poetic phrases, that intriguingly recalls some of Kandinsky's best-known abstract paintings: 'The poetical phrase can imitate . . . the horizontal line, the ascending straight line, the descending straight line . . . it can soar up towards the sky . . . or fall straight down to hell . . . it can follow the spiral, evoke the parabola or the zigzag, figuring a series of superimposed angles' (1975: 183).

The key that Lévi-Strauss's interpretation of 'Voyelles' provides to such associations is that they are based on implicit analogies between systems of differences. Here is another extract from Kandinsky's attempt to theorise the language of abstract art in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*: 'sharp colors are well suited to sharp forms (e.g., yellow in the triangle), and soft, deep colours to round forms (e.g., blue in the circle)' (Kandinsky 1970: 47). From a Lévi-Straussian perspective, these associations are neither mystical nor arbitrary. They are reducible to a series of implied homologies. In other words, what we can translate Kandinsky as saying here is: the difference between yellow and blue is analogous to that between acute and oblique, to which one may add that between warm and cold.

It would be absurd to try to account for the production of meaning in a painting such as Kandinsky's *Improvisation with Cold Forms* wholly and solely in terms of a series of structural analogies of this kind. Kandinsky's own theorisation of the expressive charge of pictorial elements shows just how complex the grammar of abstraction is. However, this analogical logic may be seen to provide one key to a part of the functioning of this grammar, a part that is perhaps somewhat obscured in Kandinsky's own account of it. Specifically, it may explain the setting into motion of the series of associations that such a painting may provoke in the viewer and, as it were, the determination of their general direction. In this context, one of the roles of the imagination – here, the viewer's imagination – may be seen as that of making a kind of analogical leap – or indeed several analogical leaps. In other words his or her role is to complete the series of logico-sensible homologies contained in the painting, and in the process attribute to them a semantic value: blue is to red, such as cold is to warm, such as thinking is to love.

through distortion, an integral element of signification in the painting, as important as the figures themselves. Which is why Kandinsky writes about *Bathers* that: 'stress is laid on purely artistic aims with strong accompaniment of the abstract' (49).

INSIDE/OUTSIDE

In an interview with Damien Pettigrew, Federico Fellini says about the creative process:

A film, even if it is very complicated to make and requires a lot of time, can exist in a sensation, an intuition, an anticipation: it can be a flash of light, a sound. A work of art can be anticipated, announced to its author, even by a scent. The whole of life can be suggested by a creature that isn't alive but that desires to live. It can be suggested by the trembling of a leaf, which contains the whole universe. There is no doubt that a film can be born from the shade of a colour, the memory of a voice, from two notes of music. (Fellini 1994: 66, my translation)

These remarks about the film making process touch upon a fundamental yet enigmatic aspect of our relationship to the sensible world, which is also at the core of the aesthetic experience. In one sense, we apprehend the sensible world as an external reality that we oppose to the private world of thoughts and impressions that makes up so-called internal reality. Yet, as Fellini's remarks suggest, these two worlds may sometimes – as in the aesthetic experience – enter into meaningful correlations with one another, and even appear to switch positions. This is what occurs when images extracted (or abstracted) from external reality – a desolate water-logged field, for example – become part of an inner landscape where they are invested with a meaning, and, in turn, inner moods, thoughts or emotions become part of the fabric of perceived reality, thereby transforming it. This chiasmic switching of positions of inner and outer reality is one of the keys to Romantic landscape painting, but also to abstract art and perhaps other forms of art too. Here, the inadequacy of any hard and fast opposition between an external and an internal world becomes apparent.

The possibility of standing the relationship between inner and outer reality on its head was already made apparent by the seventeenth-century philosophers who, drawing on the Greek Atomists, first theorised the notion of 'secondary qualities', a notion that, in revised form, Lévi-Strauss takes up for his own anthropological purposes and invests with new significance.¹¹ According to seventeenth-century thought, 'secondary qualities' were not inherent in the object itself but a variable product of an act of perception and hence in part subjective. By contrast, so-called primary qualities – such as solidity, extension, shape, mobility and number – were thought to belong, as such, to the observable object and, more specifically,

¹¹ In the 'Overture' he describes one of the aims of the *Mythologiques* as: 'to introduce these secondary qualities into the operations of truth' (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 14; 1964a: 22). Cited in chapter 3 above.

to its 'corpuscular' level of organisation, which is insensible. As Locke put it in his famous *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), primary qualities are: 'utterly inseparable from ... a body', whereas secondary qualities 'in truth are nothing in ... objects themselves, but powers to produce various sensations in us'. For Locke, therefore, it is wrong to think of snow as *being* white. The sensation of whiteness is the product of the – essentially mysterious – interaction of the arrangement of the primary-quality corpuscles that make up snow, and our sense organs. Far from possessing the quality of whiteness, snow *causes* whiteness in much the same way that fire causes pain.

Lévi-Strauss's return to secondary qualities is not primarily about the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. His aim is to draw out the relevance of an understanding of the mechanisms of sense perception for an anthropological theory of cultural production. Whiteness occurs in the intangible realm between the subjective and objective dimensions of perception. For Lévi-Strauss, this realm is also that of the elaboration of what he calls 'logic of sensible qualities'. As I have tried to show in this chapter, it is also the realm of the aesthetic experience. The work of art, like whiteness, is at once outside and inside of us. In the aesthetic experience, our external and internal worlds no longer stand in opposition to one another, but form the poles of a reversible continuum. This is the case not only for the creating artist, who discovers, in the trembling of a leaf, the key to a character that he will then bring to life, but for the 'consumer' of the work of art, who must experience the inner world of that character through its sensible manifestations, or the mood of a painting through its special combination of colours and forms. For, as Baudelaire knew very well, and in their own way Fellini and Lévi-Strauss too, the aesthetic experience temporarily modifies our ordinary relationship to the world, which is metonymic (part to whole). Through the aesthetic experience, the outer word becomes internalised and reflected in us. Metonymy becomes metaphor. Here, the aesthetic experience may be viewed as a switching of positions of the infinitely large and the infinitely small – in short, a process of miniaturisation.

The anthropologist as art critic

There are scattered throughout Lévi-Strauss's writings a number of comments – sometimes developed into essay-length studies – on Western art and artists. In particular, Lévi-Strauss has expressed his views on three of the most important movements to have shaped the evolution of modern European art: Impressionism, Cubism and abstract art. He has also written about individual artists: the German painter and illustrator of children's books Anita Albus (the cover of the French edition of *The View from Afar* is by her), and major figures such as Poussin, Cézanne and Picasso. In what follows, I will be concerned with Lévi-Strauss's writings on Western art. What does Lévi-Strauss value in Western art? According to what criteria does he judge it? How does he relate 'primitive' and Western art? These are the questions that I will be addressing in this chapter in which I propose to examine the ideas of the anthropologist-turned-art-critic. The specificity of his point of view, which is at once an advantage and a disadvantage, is a certain distance on the historical developments that concern the traditional art historian, developments that he apprehends, as it were, from the outside, in other words in their relationship to the artistic practices of 'exotic' societies.

At first, Lévi-Strauss seems to express conflicting views about Western art. On the one hand, he is critical of the great European tradition of figurative painting. He relates the high value attached to figuration, in particular since the Renaissance, to a concupiscent desire to *possess* the object – the beautiful object – by the means of its effigy. But at the same time, he places great value on the *trompe-l'œil* and has a marked predilection for an art of minute observation, as one can see from his fascination with the lace ruff painted by Clouet. He is also highly critical of Cubism and abstract art, both of which, on the surface of things, seem closer to the 'primitive' art forms he loves and defends than, say, classical representational art. Lévi-Strauss's views on Western art, however, are conflicting only in appearance. In fact, they obey their own compelling rationale. This becomes

apparent when one identifies the criteria (explicitly formulated or not) according to which Lévi-Strauss evaluates works of art. The most important criterion that he applies when making aesthetic judgements is that art must always go 'beyond the eye', that is, beyond the sensible, beyond what is merely *apparent*. And in doing so art should fulfil a *cognitive function*.¹ This is put succinctly in a comment about Picasso: 'The problem posed by Picasso – and by cubism and painting in general beyond cubism – is to know to what extent the work itself accomplished a structural analysis of reality. In other words, is it for us a medium of knowledge?' (1978b: 277; 1973a: 326). Lévi-Strauss's writings suggest that two main paths lie open to the artist in pursuit of this goal: (1) he/she may choose to signify the object instead of representing it; (2) he/she may choose to represent the object. In this case, however, the representation must always be a reconstruction and not a reproduction of the object. One may call such a form of representation 'structural representation'.² In certain limited respects, these two paths correspond, in Lévi-Strauss's thought, to the two paths taken respectively by 'primitive' art and classical Western art.

THE ART OF THE SIGNIFIER: 'PRIMITIVE' ART

One of the particularities of the art of 'primitive' cultures lies in its intimate relationship with magical or religious beliefs. The natural world in which

¹ This is one of the fundamental principles of Lévi-Strauss's aesthetic theory. Its importance has been emphasised by a number of critics, among them José Guilherme Merquior (1977: 131) and Marcel Hénaff, who remarks: 'If we had to define the function of art according to Lévi-Strauss, we could say without hesitation that it is primarily a function of knowledge' (1998: 191). Merquior relates Lévi-Strauss's thesis regarding the 'cognitive function' of art to the proposition that is made in *The Savage Mind* that art is to be situated 'half-way between scientific knowledge and mythical or magical thought' (Lévi-Strauss 1966b: 22; 1962b: 37). Merquior is concerned with the system of resemblances and differences that relate art, as a medium of knowledge, to myth and science, exploring the specificity of art in this domain. Bringing in theoretical considerations from the *Introduction to the work of Marcel Mauss* (1987a; 1950a) and the *Tristes Tropiques* essay on Caduveo body painting, Merquior further relates Lévi-Strauss's theories on the cognitive function of art to the position of the artist in society as an 'outsider'. Other implications of Lévi-Strauss's theory are emphasised by Hénaff. As in my own interpretations, Hénaff draws on the theory of the 'modèle réduit' to shed light on Lévi-Strauss's conceptions, but to bring out different features from those that I have chosen to stress myself. Hénaff interprets the cognitive theory of art in the light of Lévi-Strauss's understanding of the way in which a work of art operates a synthesis between the properties of the object that it represents and the material conditions under which they appear (perspective, lighting, appearance), thus integrating structure and event (1998: 194). For a critique of Lévi-Strauss's 'cognitive' conception of art see Dorflès 1965: 434–9.

² Hénaff usefully draws attention (1998: 196) to the difference between Plato's and Aristotle's conceptions of mimesis. For the latter, the end product of mimesis is not a mere 'copy'. Aristotle construes mimesis not as imitation but as production. A similar distinction underpins Lévi-Strauss's judgements about Western art.

'primitive' cultures live is one that is steeped in the supernatural and therefore, by definition, escapes realistic representation. Its duplicate image cannot be given by the artist for whom, as Lévi-Strauss puts it, 'the model is always wide of [*déborde*] the representation' (1969b: 84; 1961: 101). This is why, Lévi-Strauss argues, most 'primitive' artists have chosen to *signify* objects rather than *reproduce* them. The key point being that such an aesthetic is not the product of an inability to produce imitations of reality, but the expression of a positive artistic intention. Its 'creative credo' is not unlike that formulated by Paul Klee: 'Art does not reproduce the visible but makes visible . . . Formerly, artists depicted things that were to be seen on the earth, things people liked to see or would like to have seen. Now the relativity of visible things is made clear, the belief expressed that the visible is only an isolated case taken from the universe and that there are more truths unseen than seen' (1961: 76). It is perhaps in the art of ancient Egypt that one encounters the most elaborate interweaving of these two artistic paths, the most subtle balance of conventionalism and representation, signs and image. It is because the 'primitive' work of art is the sign of an object rather than its mirror image that, for Lévi-Strauss, it successfully goes beyond the plane of mere appearances ('beyond the eye') and becomes a medium of knowledge.

Contrary to a common misconception about structuralism, when Lévi-Strauss characterises certain forms of art, among them 'primitive' art, as systems of signs, he is not assimilating art to language.³ Art, as Lévi-Strauss knows very well, cannot be reduced to a system of communication, a code. To do so would be to remove its specifically *aesthetic* value. Like language, the work of art is a system of signs, but, unlike language, in art the relationship between signifier and signified is not arbitrary. Arbitrariness is one of the so-called 'design features' of human languages. What linguists mean when they talk about the arbitrariness of language is that the relationship that links any given linguistic sign to the thing it signifies (its referent) is purely a matter of convention. There is no inherent reason why one series of sounds instead of another should designate, for example, a tree. The particularity of the work of art conceived as a system of signs is that, unlike with language, the choice of the signifier is deeply motivated, it corresponds to a necessity, one that, furthermore, cannot be expressed simply in terms of resemblance (iconicity). The way Lévi-Strauss puts it is that there should always be a deep homology between the structure of the signifier and that of the signified. It is not a system of arbitrary signs, but one in which there exists a sensible link between the sign and what it denotes.

³ In archaeology, Ian Hodder (1982: 9) exemplifies this misrepresentation of structuralism very well.

In this way, structures common to both are brought to light and the work of art may become a 'medium of knowledge'. Lévi-Strauss says about the aesthetic sign, summing up his conception, that it is 'halfway between language and object' (1969b: 108; 1961: 131) – it is neither entirely divorced from the object, like the linguistic sign, nor identical to it, like a copy. This central tenet of structural aesthetics, by which it departs from a classical Saussurean conception of the linguistic sign, has a long history, one that is deeply rooted in the very foundations of aesthetics as a discipline. Jean Petitot outlines this history in his recent *Morphologie et esthétique*. He points out that the idea that aesthetic signs should have a 'simple and natural relationship' (Petitot 2004: 40) with the objects they signify was at the heart of Lessing's attempt to grasp the specificity of the modes of expression of poetry and painting and overturn the principle of *ut pictura poesis*, which, until then, dominated the Western conception of the relationship between the arts. The idea of this relationship enabled Lessing, in his foundational *Laocoon*, to delineate specific and autonomous domains particular to painting and poetry. The former, he argued, is an art concerned with the spatial juxtaposition of elements – i.e. with bodies extended in space – the latter with the temporal succession (actions). Petitot further points out that the principle of the inherent unity of sign and referent, so important to Lessing, would later also play a key role in Kant's philosophy. Petitot usefully sums up the key development in the history of philosophy that lies behind the Lévi-Straussian conceptions outlined above: 'There exists an intuitive syntax – a "form of intuition" in the sense that Kant will give to this term in his "Transcendental Aesthetic" – which is *common* to the sign and the referent' (2004: 40, my translation).

Lévi-Strauss sees the opposition between an art form that represents and one that signifies as constitutive of a tension or polarity inherent in the evolution of artistic modes of expression in general. It cannot be equated with the opposition between Western and non-Western ('primitive') art. The style of early Greek sculpture which flourished until the fifth century BC, Lévi-Strauss argues, is to a greater degree an art of the signifier, whereas the style that replaced it – typified by the famous 'Discobolus' of Myron – was more 'naturalistic', i.e. representational. Italian painting until the quattrocento, that is, up to and including the Sienese school, is also 'primitivist' in this sense, and close in spirit to the kind of art produced by 'cold' societies. In contrast, Impressionism belongs on the side of representation: it is impossible to compare a Monet or a Seurat to 'primitive' art. These differences are differences of degree. Myron's 'Discobolus' is also a transposed version of the object it represents, and hence a sign of it.

CUBISM AND ABSTRACT ART

Modern art since Cubism is in many ways a form of 'primitivist' art in the sense specified above, i.e. an art of the signifier, one that is conceptual rather than perceptual. Indeed, many post-Impressionist painters and sculptors, among them the Cubists, were influenced by 'primitive' art. Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1906–7), generally considered to be one of the first Cubist paintings, drew inspiration from masks from the French Congo. Lévi-Strauss, however, contrary to what one might expect, considers Cubism to have been a failed aesthetic revolution and the abstract movement that emerged out of it a dead-end. Lévi-Strauss's severest judgement is to be found in an interview he gave in 1966, at the time of the opening of a major exhibition of Picasso's works at the Grand Palais, in which he relegates Cubist art to the rank of interior decoration (Lévi-Strauss 1978b: 277; 1973a: 326). Yet, of the three forms of modern art Lévi-Strauss discusses – Impressionism, Cubism and Abstract art – Cubism is the one that, on the face of things, comes the closest to fulfilling his ideal. It manifests a desire to go 'beyond the object', beyond what is merely *seen*, to try and depict, in Lévi-Strauss's own words, 'a truer image of reality behind the world' (1978b: 278; 1973a: 327). What, then, is the basis for Lévi-Strauss's judgement that Cubism has failed as an artistic movement? His argument runs as follows.

Cubism aspired to becoming a new aesthetic language, but like natural languages, such a language can only exist in and through the group. Our ability to use any language depends on the existence of certain collectively recognised rules, a shared 'grammar'. For socio-economic reasons that are beyond the artist's control, and which are particular to large-scale developed societies, the processes of production and consumption of works of art in Western societies have become divorced from the group as a whole – 'individualised', says Lévi-Strauss. Works of art are produced for a designated public made up of 'amateurs', whereas in 'primitive' cultures works of art are the property of everyone. Thus, although Cubism aspires to becoming a new aesthetic language, it is condemned to being no more than an idiolect (a private language), which is a contradiction in terms. About Picasso's paintings Lévi-Strauss writes: 'the signs have nothing more than the formal function of a sign-system: actually, and sociologically speaking, *they do not operate as a means of communication within a given group*' (1969b: 78; 1961: 94 *my italics*). The problem of Cubism, as Lévi-Strauss sees it, is that it cannot fulfil what he calls 'the collective function of the work of art' (1969b: 73; 1961: 90).

The result, according to Lévi-Strauss, is that despite its revolutionary ambitions, Cubism has ended up producing its own form of academism. Not the kind of academism that one encounters in certain pre-Impressionist paintings, which affects their content, i.e. the nature of what is represented (the human body, the landscape, must conform to certain ideal types; they must be represented in pre-established ways). It is an academism which pertains to the very language of artistic expression. Cubism, Lévi-Strauss argues, replaces an 'academism of the signified' with an 'academism of the signifier . . . the academism of language itself'. What Cubists imitated was each other's manner of painting – not so much what they saw but how they saw it (1969b: 75; 1961: 91–2).

Lévi-Strauss sees abstract art as simply exacerbating the problems and contradictions already contained in Cubism. Whereas there remained in Cubism at least an intention to arrive at an understanding of the objects it represented, abstract art evacuates the object completely. This is the 'academism of the signifier' taken to extremes, where art becomes no more than an empty mimicry of the process of signification. For Lévi-Strauss, the abstract artist's subject matter consists of other formal systems of expression. Abstract art is, in Lévi-Strauss's words, 'a sort of gratuitous playing about with artistic languages' (1969b: 77; 1961: 94).⁴

In this connection, Lévi-Strauss opposes two artistic attitudes to the question of influence. The Western artist, in the modern epoch, seeks to incorporate into his work the forms created by other artists – notably 'primitive' artists. He is a 'consumer' of other aesthetic languages. The 'primitive' artist, on the contrary, seeks to protect at all costs the individuality of his own 'language'. His attitude to the languages of other artists from neighbouring groups is one of opposition. Through his art he affirms his difference. This 'bulimia' of Western art, as Lévi-Strauss calls it (1969b: 75; 1961: 91–2), manifests itself in the characteristic way in which the modern artist – from Picasso, to Masson and Picabia (and in music, Stravinsky) – frequently changes style. In a reply to an enquiry led by the journal *Arts* into the future of Western art (1978b: 281–3; 1973a: 330–3), Lévi-Strauss draws up a portrait of Western art as a spoilt child, engulfing the art of past and present populations, exhausting and polluting its sources of inspiration, and finally losing all appetite (1978b: 282–3; 1973a: 332–3). Furthermore, as new forms of academism, Cubism and abstract art create according to pre-established 'recipes' (it is true that in their Cubist periods some of the works of Picasso

⁴ I have formulated a critique of this position and attempted to find a way out of it, using Lévi-Strauss's own theories, in the preceding chapter.

and Braque are virtually indistinguishable). What Lévi-Strauss values in art is a certain naivety in the process of composition. As he puts it: 'the real problem posed by artistic creation lies in the impossibility of thinking through the outcome ahead of time' (1978b: 278; 1973a: 327). The decline of art that Lévi-Strauss associates with Cubism and abstraction was prepared, he argues, much earlier. In 'To a Young Painter' (1987b: 248–57; 1983: 333–44), he deplores the Impressionist appeal to artistic spontaneity and the calamitous loss of craftsmanship that ensued from it. He reads the history of modern European art as a series of mistakes with increasingly disastrous consequences, referring to the saying by Marx that history repeats itself by caricaturing itself. He reminds his readers first of the 'prophetic' words of Baudelaire, who wrote about Manet that he was 'the first in the decrepitude of his art', and then of the Austrian art historian Aloïs Riegl (1858–1905), who draws up an even bleaker picture: 'The golden age of the plastic arts came to an end at the beginning of modern times; the illusionism of the Renaissance was their final spark as well as their farewell' (both cited: Lévi-Strauss 1987b: 251; 1983: 336).

Lévi-Strauss himself admits that his theories regarding modernist art, and in particular abstract art, are rationalisations of a historical attitude (1969b: 126; 1961: 152). To understand this attitude would require a longer and more detailed study than I have space for here, one that would situate Lévi-Strauss's ideas in the social and cultural context of the times in which his sensibilities were shaped (the Paris of the first half of the twentieth century). No doubt more personal biographical factors play a role too, in particular the fact that his father was himself a fairly classical painter and portraitist. Without delving that far, Lévi-Strauss's critique of Cubism and abstract art echoes a familiar objection raised against modern art, in particular by Marxist critics, namely that it is elitist (Lévi-Strauss's early involvement with the Socialist party is relevant here). Lévi-Strauss's argument about the necessity for a collective basis to all languages, including aesthetic languages, is simply giving a sociological twist to this familiar criticism. One of the problems with Lévi-Strauss's stance is that it excludes the very possibility of there being such a thing as avant-garde art (an art in rupture with the past), since for him the language of art must always arise out of the group's heritage and recognised codes of expression: 'language ... is a stable phenomenon' (1969b: 75; 1961: 92). What Lévi-Strauss does not see or appreciate is the capacity of new art forms to forge their own tools of expression, to create their own aesthetic idioms, independently from (or in opposition to) the codes already recognised by any given group. Innovative art forms create their own 'grammars', *the learning*

of which is integral to the aesthetic experience. This grammar is extracted, as it were, from within the object itself. It is possible to do so precisely because, as Lévi-Strauss knows very well, art is not a system of signs that is exactly equivalent to a natural language: its forms of expression are also rooted in supra- or infra-linguistic perceptual experiences (sensory intuition). It is a grammar of perception, one that is indeed mediated by cultural codes but that also exists independently from them, as does affect – the immersed part of the iceberg that is culture.

REPRESENTATION AS RECONSTRUCTION

In art forms that have chosen the path of signification as opposed to that of mimesis, the cognitive function of art is fulfilled in the space that separates the sign from the thing it signifies. But what about traditional representational art? How does *it* succeed, despite its anchoring in the world of appearances, in going ‘beyond the eye’ and becoming a medium of knowledge? Lévi-Strauss’s writings invite one to distinguish between two forms of representation, a slavish imitation of the real that adds nothing to it, and a form of representation which does not so much reproduce the object as reconstruct or re-create it.

We have already seen, in chapter 1, that for Lévi-Strauss all works of art partake of the nature of miniatures or scale models. This is because the work of art must always forego one or another of its model’s dimensions and hence be ‘reduced’. Works of art are simplified objects, schemas. One consequence of the renunciation of certain *sensible* dimensions (in painting, for example, the third dimension) is that they are compensated for by the acquisition of *intelligible* dimensions. What the eye cannot see is supplemented by the mind/imagination. The work of art is always, in this sense, a union of the sensible and the intelligible. It requires that the artist and the viewer bring their knowledge to a lacunary object and actively constitute it as an object of experience (the viewer is therefore always a co-author of the work of art).

The kind of representation valued by Lévi-Strauss involves a dissolution and reconstruction of the object. In the process of reconstruction the artist incorporates into the image of the object an understanding of it. The reconstructed object, although similar in appearance to its model, is different in as much as it bears the mark of the process of creation. Lévi-Strauss insists on the following important attribute of ‘modèles réduits’, a crucial link in the analogy with the work of art: ‘They are “man made” and, what is more, made by hand. *They are therefore not just projections or passive*

homologues of the object: they constitute a real experiment with it (1966b: 24; 1962b: 38, my italics).

A number of examples taken from *Look Listen Read* illustrate this process of artistic *reconstruction*, which is so crucial to Lévi-Strauss's understanding of aesthetic processes. He describes the working method of the great nineteenth-century Japanese ukiyo-e master, Kawanabe Kyôsei. Kyôsei once confessed that he did not understand why Western painters made their models pose for them. Kyôsei loved to paint birds. To render a likeness, he would observe a bird for an entire day. Each time that the pose he wanted to represent fleetingly appeared, he would walk away from the model and 'note down', sketch in a few lines, in one of his notebooks of which he had several hundred, what he *remembered*. At the end of the day, his memory of the pose would be so good that he would be able to reproduce it without seeing the bird. The work of art here is not an imitation but a re-creation of the object which incorporates into its image an 'experience of the object'. One might also say that Kyôsei's paintings present a realistic image of a model that does not exist, or that exists only in the artist's mind.

Poussin uses a technique that can be compared to Kyôsei's. In his painting *Pyrame et Thisbé* he depicts a storm. In doing so, he brings together different moments of the event that would otherwise be separate in time. He shows at once the stillness of a lake at the moment just before the storm, and trees twisted in the full force of its outbreak. Different aspects of the event, both actual and possible, are juxtaposed on the same plane. Poussin reconstructs the storm from its composite elements, and in this way, Lévi-Strauss suggests, the total experience of a storm is conveyed. Structural aesthetics interconnect, here, with phenomenology. In 'Eye and Mind' Merleau-Ponty discusses the problem of how art conveys movement (2004: 315–17). He contrasts painting and photography, remarking that photographs of sportsmen, far from giving a sense of movement, present an image that appears to be frozen in time (the basketball player suspended in mid-air, about to slam-dunk). This is because the photographic image isolates a single instant in time which it for ever holds in suspense (this is not always the case; photography also has the means of avoiding this effect). Art proceeds differently, namely by assembling moments spread over time. Thus, Rodin's sculptures show the human body in postures that never existed as such, which are constructed out of several postures: the arms, the legs, the torso, the head are all seized at different moments in time and reconstructed to create the *effect* of movement (*L'Homme qui marche* is a good example of this). About the horses that Géricault painted, Merleau-Ponty writes: 'they have a foot in each instant' (2004: 317).

Lévi-Strauss's discussion of Proust in *Look Listen Read* also brings out the significance of reconstruction – including the reconstruction of temporal sequences – in the process of creation. One is never sure, he says, about the musical phrase from the Vinteuil sonata, whether it is based on impressions derived from listening to Schubert, Wagner, Franck, Saint-Saëns or Fauré. A similar confusion arises with Elstir's paintings, which are reminiscent at once of Manet, Monet and Patinir. One of the charms of Proust, for Lévi-Strauss, lies in the fact that the diverse pieces of the mosaic he puts together are never totally assimilated; they retain something of their individuality as fragments, revealing something of the work of reconstruction that went on behind the scenes. Lévi-Strauss cites a remark by one of Proust's commentators: 'The reader wonders whether the children on the Champs-Élysées are still playing hoops or already puffing at their first clandestine cigarette' (Lévi-Strauss 1997: 6; 1993a: 9–10). Similarly, one is never entirely sure, in *La Recherche*, of the exact age of the narrator. Like Géricault's horses, Proust's characters have a foot in each instant.

Lévi-Strauss is suspicious of forms of art, such as photography, that seem to by-pass the process of aesthetic reconstruction to rely only on the immediacy of sense impression (current research in contemporary photography studies show that photography is in fact as much of a reconstruction as any other art form). Lévi-Strauss prefers the beginnings of photography, when the rudimentary nature of the equipment required, according to him, more creative input from the photographer, who in a sense needed to add more to the mechanically produced image. It is perhaps in relationship to the art of the *trompe-l'œil*, which in the Lévi-Straussian scheme of affairs lies in diametrical opposition to photography, that Lévi-Strauss has formulated, most clearly, his aesthetic of reconstruction. It is worth citing here, in full, the relevant passage from *Look Listen Read* (part of which has already been cited in chapter 1 above):

With *trompe l'œil*, one does not represent, one reconstructs. This requires knowledge (even of what is not shown) together with reflection. *Trompe l'œil* is selective; it does not seek to render everything about the model, nor just anything. It chooses the [wax-like] quality of the grapes rather than some other aspect, because it fits into a system of perceptible qualities formed of the [greasiness] of a silver or pewter vase (its other qualities ignored), the crumbly character of a piece of cheese, and so on. (1997: 29; 1993a: 32)⁵

On the question of aesthetic reconstruction, Lévi-Strauss could have said about art in general what Walter Benjamin says about the art of storytelling

⁵ I have amended the translation.

in particular. The good storyteller, Benjamin says, does not provide explanations of what his story is about, he *embeds* the meaning of his story in its very substance. Storytelling, for Benjamin, is an 'artisan form of communication' in that 'it . . . does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again.'⁶ He goes on to compare the storyteller to a potter: 'traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel'.⁷ Lévi-Strauss's comparison of the artist to a *bricoleur*, also an artisan, brings out a similar point to the one Benjamin makes with his metaphor of the potter. Lévi-Strauss characterises the *bricoleur* in terms of the kinds of 'tools' he uses. First of all, these are always tools that he has inherited and that have been used by others before him. The engineer – a specialist rather than an artisan – on the contrary, creates new tools for each new project he/she embarks upon. Second, and more importantly in the present context, whereas the engineer works with concepts the *bricoleur*, says Lévi-Strauss, works with signs. Concepts, writes Lévi-Strauss, are 'transparent to reality', they interpose no material body between the idea and the world. Signs, on the contrary, are concrete objects *that bear the mark of the process of human invention* (1966b: 20; 1962b: 34). Like Benjamin's clay vessel on which one can see the traces of the potter's hands, the elements with which the *artist/bricoleur* works possess what Lévi-Strauss calls 'une certaine épaisseur d'humanité' (1966b: 20; 1962b: 34) – they bear the marks of the hands that made them. Which is also to say that they are inscribed by their particular history, and carry within them traces of their past meaning. Lévi-Strauss's description of the *bricoleur* at work brings out his/her resemblance to Benjamin's storyteller:

the 'bricoleur' . . . principally, derives his poetry from the fact that he does not confine himself to accomplishment and execution: he 'speaks' not only *with* things . . . but also through the medium of things: giving an account of his personality and life by the choices he makes . . . The 'bricoleur' may not ever complete his purpose but he always puts something of himself into it. (1966b: 21; 1962b: 35)

According to such an aesthetic, there is a value in incompleteness. It is important to see how the signifying elements have been put together as this enables the construction of a narrative about the coming into being of the work of art, which itself extends the life-span of the object, giving it a past life, as it were.

⁶ Benjamin 1969: 91–2. ⁷ *Illuminations*, p. 92.

IMPRESSIONISM

Impressionist art is clearly as much a 'reconstruction' of the sensible world as Kyōsai's paintings of birds or Poussin's depiction of a storm are. Indeed, some of the modernist techniques which the Impressionists invented, such as the feathery brush strokes for which they became famous, aimed to draw attention to the process of artistic 'reconstruction', by emphasising the materiality and opacity of the painted surface of the canvas. Why then is Lévi-Strauss critical of this movement?

Impressionism took the form of an attempt to rediscover what Lévi-Strauss terms the 'raw object', as opposed to the object as painters had learnt to see it through the works of the masters of the past. It rejected the interpretation of nature implicit in previous representations of it (classical, romantic), which determined not only how it should be represented but what it should consist of. The Romantics, for example, inherited from the eighteenth century a conception of the landscape that owes much to aesthetic notions about the sublime, with its insistence on the awe-inspiring grandeur of objects in the natural world. Romantic paintings of landscapes frequently included such features as waterfalls, mountains or hundred-year-old trees. In contrast, what characterised Impressionist painting was a concern with the immediacy of the visual experience. The Impressionist painters sought to record the fleeting moment, and they set out to do so in a detached, matter-of-fact manner, sometimes even aspiring to something like scientific objectivity.⁸ As Lévi-Strauss points out, the change in the approach to the depiction of nature brought about by the Impressionists was concomitant with a transformation of nature itself under the effects of urbanisation. These social changes were reflected in particular, Lévi-Strauss argues, in the change in subject matter which occurred in Impressionist paintings. The Impressionists turned their backs on the grand landscapes celebrated by Romantic painters and elected to represent more modest scenes, typically taken from contemporary life in the *banlieue*, as in Renoir's paintings of bathers at La Grenouillère. In terms of both style and subject matter, Impressionism was an innovative art form.

However, these innovations did little more, in Lévi-Strauss's opinion, than bring about what he describes as a 'revolution [which] is superficial and only skin-deep' (1969b: 70; 1961: 86). In its efforts to rediscover the 'raw object', it concentrated to excess on the surface of things, locating its

⁸ They read the work of the French physicist Augustin Jean Fresnel (1788–1827), who contributed to establishing the wave theory of light, and studied interference phenomena related to diffraction.

point of focus in the dispersal of light at the point of contact with the object. In doing so, it neglected, Lévi-Strauss argues, the object itself. He sees Impressionism as having pulled art towards the subjective experience of the artist (even if the artists themselves claimed to be doing the reverse) whereas what Lévi-Strauss asks of the artist is that he/she provides a means of understanding the object itself. Lévi-Strauss sums up his critique of Impressionism in *The View from Afar*:

Impressionism gave up too quickly when it accepted the idea that the sole ambition of painting is to grasp what the theoreticians of the era called the physiognomy of things – that is, their subjective aspect – as opposed to an objectivity that aims to apprehend their nature. An artist considers haystacks subjectively when he tries to render, in a series of paintings, the transitory impressions made by those haystacks on his eye at a particular time of day, in a particular light. Yet, at the same time, he forgoes making the viewer grasp intuitively what a haystack is in and of itself. (1987b: 249; 1983: 334)

Although Impressionism may indeed be a ‘medium of knowledge’, it does not afford knowledge of what interests Lévi-Strauss most. It abandons the attempt to understand ‘what a haystack is in and of itself’, and therefore cannot be counted by Lévi-Strauss among the art forms he most greatly values. This failing of Impressionism comes out best when he compares it to Cubism. He cites the example of Georges Seurat, whom he nevertheless considers to be a great painter. The significance of Seurat, for Lévi-Strauss, is that he situated art at a point always ‘short of nature’ (1987b: 249; 1983: 335), more precisely, ‘between the objects themselves and the way in which they act upon a painter’s or a viewer’s retina’ (1987b: 249; 1983: 335). In contrast and in reaction to this aesthetic, Cubism sought to create a form of pictorial expression that went beyond the object, ‘on the other side of nature’ (1987b: 249; 1983: 335), although it too failed in Lévi-Strauss’s opinion, for reasons that I have already explained. Both forms of art ‘miss the object’, the one by aiming too close to, the other too far from, the observer.

BEYOND THE EYE: STRUCTURAL REPRESENTATION

It is the art of minute observation that Lévi-Strauss seems to value most highly. He writes admiringly of the great representational artists who, in contrast to the Impressionists, showed a deferential attentiveness to the complexity and variety of the sensible world. Lévi-Strauss feels close to the northern tradition of realistic painting, born in Flanders at the beginning of the fifteenth century, the Golden Age of Van Eyck and van der Weyden.

About these artists he writes: '[they] never tired of painting arrangements of folds in order to render, *from the inside as it were*, the countless ways in which a fabric falls' (1987b: 249; 1983: 334, my italics) – a task that demands that the artist take into account, Lévi-Strauss continues, whether the fabric in question is wool or silk, twill, drugget, satin or taffeta, whether it is worn directly against the skin or with an undergarment, whether it has been cut in a straight line, or on the bias. For Lévi-Strauss, the art of the *trompe-l'œil*, such as it was practised by the German and Dutch painters of the seventeenth century for example, or by Chardin, did not so much deceive the eye as reveal what lies beyond its grasp: 'the [*trompe-l'œil*] grasps and displays what was not perceived, or only dimly or fleetingly so, but that, thanks to its art, can now be seen at one's leisure' (1997: 30; 1993a: 33). The genius of Ingres, as Lévi-Strauss describes it, was that he was able at once to create the illusion of the objects he represented – such as his famous cashmere shawls – and go beyond perception to arrive at an understanding of the structure of the object of perception (1969b: 90; 1961: 109). The artist's representation, while re-creating the object, must reveal, in Lévi-Strauss's words, 'something that was not immediately present in our perception of the object, and that is its structure' (1969b: 89; 1961: 108).

Here too, Lévi-Strauss's theory of the 'modèle réduit' encapsulates his theoretical positions. The work of art enables one to penetrate the sensible surface of things and reveal the interiority of nature because it functions like an analogon. Not only a 'modèle réduit', but a model in the scientific sense of the word: '[the] quantitative transposition extends and diversifies our power over a homologue of the thing', says Lévi-Strauss (1966b: 23; 1962b: 38). The 'modèle réduit' becomes the locus of the elaboration of our understanding of its full-scale counterpart.

In the *Conversations* with Charbonnier, Lévi-Strauss formulates an important idea that adds another dimension to his cognitive theory of art. He begins by saying what I have already outlined above, namely that '[the work of art] allows us to discover or perceive properties of the object which are normally concealed', but here adds the further proposition: '*and which are the very properties it has in common with the structure and functioning of the human mind*' (1969b: 125; 1961: 151, my italics). What the viewer perceives through the aesthetically reconstructed object is not simply the internal structure of the real object, but a correspondence between that structure and a pattern of thought. One is led, here, to conceive of the viewer as caught up in a system of projections of mirror images in which mind and world reflect one another. Lévi-Strauss places this reflexivity at the core of his understanding of aesthetic experience. He returns to this topic in

The Savage Mind.⁹ In its concluding section Lévi-Strauss defines 'wild' thinking as a mode of thought in which 'man and the world mirror each other' (1966b: 222; 1962b: 266). This notion is further developed in a key metaphor that Lévi-Strauss uses to characterise the manner in which the world is apprehended by 'wild' thinking, which he likens to the way in which a room would be apprehended by means of two mirrors placed on opposite walls, positioned in such a way that they do not exactly face one another. What these mirrors reflect is a multitude of partial images, none of which reveals the room and its contents in their entirety, but which show groups of objects in certain constant relationships. In as much as these relationships are constant, they provide an accurate, if incomplete, picture of the room itself. Lévi-Strauss's metaphor is open to various interpretations. It clearly defines two orders of reality. The room, however, cannot easily be equated with what is ordinarily understood by external reality (the sensible world) and the mirrors with the mind (internal reality). For the point of Lévi-Strauss's analogy is that knowledge of the room itself, perhaps one should say *direct* knowledge, is forever denied to human beings. Thus, if the room in Lévi-Strauss's metaphor is meant to correspond to reality, it is a reality that is in some vital sense unknowable (noumenal, one might say), or unverifiable except by examining fragmented and incomplete reflections of it. Lévi-Strauss's metaphor sheds light on his proposition, cited above, that the work of art enables the viewer to apprehend structures that are common to the object and to the mind.

Lévi-Strauss concludes his mirror metaphor in the following terms: '[untamed thinking] deepens its knowledge with the help of *images mundi*. It builds mental structures which facilitate an understanding of the world *in as much as they resemble it*' (1966b: 263; 1962b: 313; the second set of italics are mine).¹⁰ Lévi-Strauss does not mean here that the images, created by the mind, literally resemble the world – they are not representations of reality. Rather, they resemble it because in some vital sense the structure of reality is paralleled by the structure of thought. What the artist depicts is not only the world itself but 'an image of the world which is already inherent in the structure of the mind' (1970: 341; 1964a: 346). In the *Conversations* with Charbonnier, Lévi-Strauss says that art should devote itself to: 'the recreation of an objective world to which we shall probably never have access and which we can try to conjure up through painting'

⁹ The *Conversations* with Charbonnier and *The Savage Mind* are roughly contemporaneous. The former were broadcast in October, November and December 1959, in all likelihood at the time when Lévi-Strauss was planning *The Savage Mind*, which he wrote in a relatively short period of time between June and October 1961.

¹⁰ I have modified this translation.

(1969b: 139; 1961: 168). The Kantian strand in Lévi-Strauss's aesthetic theories will already have become apparent from the pages that precede. Here it is Kant's argument for the possibility of synthetic a priori knowledge – knowledge that is of the world, but acquired independently of experience – that informs Lévi-Strauss's ideas about art and what, or how, art signifies. As Lévi-Strauss states himself in *The Savage Mind*, even the propositions of pure mathematics present an image of the world: 'As the mind is a thing, the functioning of this thing teaches us something about the nature of things: even pure reflection is in the last analysis an internalization of the cosmos. It illustrates the structure of what lies outside in a symbolic form' (1966b: 248; 1962b: 295–6).

A further key point emerges from the above discussion. In his theorisation of the relationship between the work of art, construed as a sign, and the object that it denotes, Lévi-Strauss uses the concept of structure in a sense that departs from that which is normally attributed to it. The model of the structures evoked here is not to be found in the analysis of language. They are more shadowy structures immanent to the sensible, i.e. nature. The genealogy of this use of the term structure is different from the well-documented formalist genealogy, which goes via Saussure, Jakobson and Troubetzkoy. It is a naturalist genealogy, that has been brought to light, most recently, by Jean Petitot (2004: 69–74). It may be traced, according to Lévi-Strauss's own indications (1991b: 113; 1988a: 159), to Darcy Wentworth Thompson's *On Growth and Form*, to Goethe's *The Metamorphosis of Plants* and, beyond these works, to Albrecht Dürer's *Treatise on the Proportions of the Human Body*. Lévi-Strauss's model of a structure, in this context, must be sought in a Gestaltist conception of natural organisms, which '[treats] structures as developing dynamic forms . . . as (self-)organised and (self-)regulated morphodynamic totalities' (Petitot 2004: 70, my translation). In short, what lies behind the Lévi-Straussian notion of structure is more than the idea of linguistic-style differential units. In particular, what this alternative genealogy reveals is that the concept of structure is derived from that of transformation (there is a necessary connection between the two concepts, which is something which has not been sufficiently noted). *On Growth and Form* sets out to show that one can deduce the shape of one biological species through transformation of another using algebraic functions, a theme that was pursued by Goethe in his own study of the metamorphosis of plants (that these transformations may be formalised using mathematics was no doubt a further key lesson for structuralism). From the vantage point onto the structural theory of culture afforded by these genealogical connections, human societies themselves appear as developing natural species.

Nature, culture, chance

In this chapter, I would like to continue to explore some of the untapped potentialities of Lévi-Strauss's thought for an understanding of art, and more specifically certain forms of avant-garde art.¹ The question at the core of this chapter may be summed up as follows: to what extent may avant-garde art be seen to function mytho-poetically? The precise meaning of this question will become apparent in what follows. In very broad terms, what I designate here by 'mytho-poetic function', following a view that is implicit in Lévi-Strauss's works but not theorised as such, is a boundary-marking function, one that is at the very core of the way in which we create an order of the world around us.²

To explore this mytho-poetic function of art, I would like to turn to a series of three key essays that I have so far only touched upon: 'Indian Cosmetics' (1942), 'Split Representation in the Art of Asia and America' (1963a: 245–68; 1958: 269–94) and 'A Native Society and Its Style' (chapter xx of *Tristes Tropiques*). These essays, written in the 1940s, deal with a topic seemingly far from that of mythical thought, a form of body painting practised by the Caduveo, a population from the Matto Grosso region of Brazil. As we shall see, however, they are crucial for an understanding of the mytho-poetic function and indeed of Lévi-Strauss's aesthetic thought in general. To show this, I will trace here a series of buried connections that link the above essays to other works by Lévi-Strauss, among them the *Conversations* with Charbonnier, the *Elementary Structures of Kinship* and

¹ I am using the term avant-garde here, following critics such as Peter Bürger, to designate certain artistic practices, in rupture with the past, that fulfil a critical purpose in relation to traditional artistic institutions and conceptions.

² There are many different ways of construing the mytho-poetic function and it is indeed in a different sense that I have used this expression in chapter 1, where it denotes what one may loosely describe as the stringing together of multiple metaphors – in Lévi-Straussian terms, the conversion or translation of one code into another. In chapter 1, I took this to be an unconscious operation at work in the writing process that underpins the conscious elaboration of arguments. It is worth spelling out that mythical thought, as understood by Lévi-Strauss, is not confined to myth.

the *Mythologiques*. I will try to excavate a network of interconnected motifs and bring to light the more general aesthetic significance of these texts. As was the case with abstract art (see chapter 4), here too I will show that Lévi-Strauss's ideas are apt to shed light on forms of art with which he has little affinity or whose value and legitimacy he would possibly reject. Indeed, an in-depth reading of Lévi-Strauss's writings on Caduveo body painting provides valuable insights for understanding various forms of avant-garde art, from Duchamp's readymades, to Anthony Caro's abstract sculptures, and assemblages by the Nouveau Réaliste artist Arman. Although these forms of art would constitute for Lévi-Strauss what he would call, pejoratively, an 'academism of the signifier', I will argue, here, that Lévi-Strauss's own theorisation of the relations between nature, culture and art enables us to see them, in at least one of their dimensions, as a prime example of the fulfilling of the mytho-poetic function.

ART AND THE BODY

Lévi-Strauss first came across Caduveo body painting in 1935–6, during his first ethnographic field expedition. He was fortunate enough to be able to experience this art form as a part of a living tradition and was immediately fascinated. A letter written on the 15 January 1936 to Mário de Andrade provides a rare glimpse at Lévi-Strauss's first impressions, as he recorded them on the spur of the moment:

We have just finished the first part of our work: for a month and a half we have travelled between the various groups of Caduveo that still subsist. At the end of this study we spent a fortnight in the last village that is still prosperous: Nalike. The women there paint their faces with drawings that are incredibly refined . . . The material conditions are of course hard . . . In the Pantanal the heat weighs heavily on one . . . and the mosquitoes are as one imagines them to be. But there are so many objects of interest and admiration that all the rest takes on a limited importance. (as cited Wiseman 2004a: 257)

A series of photographs taken by Lévi-Strauss preserve for the modern reader a visual record of this evanescent art form. One of them is of a child, maybe four or five years old, with a great shock of untidy hair. He is smiling for the camera. A line splits his face in two halves from top to bottom. A series of volutes adorn his chin. Other lines wind across the surface of his skin like paths across a landscape, one of them bisecting the left eye, another twisting down from the right-hand side of the forehead to the left cheek. Another photograph is of a melancholy looking middle-aged



Illustration 2: 'Caduveo Woman' (1935). Caduveo woman with painted face.
Photograph by Claude Lévi-Strauss.

woman, whose face is covered by a denser network of arabesques. She seems to be peering out from behind a complicated ornamental screen.

Caduveo body painting is a traditional art form that has remained largely unchanged since the eighteenth century. It is practised mainly by women on women, although in the past men also painted their bodies. What Lévi-Strauss immediately notices is its powerful erotic charge, one that he associates with the way in which the designs seem sadistically to cut up or distort the human form. The intention behind Caduveo art recalls, in this respect, Hans Bellmer's disturbing articulated doll which so enthralled the Surrealists at more or less the same time that Lévi-Strauss

first encountered the Caduveo.³ About Caduveo art Lévi-Strauss wrote: 'The delicate and subtle traceries, as sensitive as the lines of the face, but which sometimes accent them and sometimes falsify them, enhance them and at the same time contradict them, give to the feminine countenance something deliciously stimulating. They are the promise and outline of expert bruising. This graphic surgery grafts the loveliest constructions of art upon the base of the human body' (1942: 35).

Lévi-Strauss's three attempts at interpreting the significance of this art form bring out its multilayered, overdetermined nature. In Lévi-Strauss's more complex second essay (1963a; 1958) he approaches Caduveo art as part of his attempt to solve an ongoing anthropological debate regarding the recurrence, in a number of populations distant in space and time, of a highly stylised form of representation known as 'split representation', which Lévi-Strauss translates, for reasons that will become apparent, as 'représentation dédoublée'.

The debate surrounding this question involved the Indians of the Northwest Coast of North America (eighteenth to nineteenth centuries), populations from Ancient China (first to second millennia BC), and the Maori from New Zealand (fourteenth to eighteenth centuries). In each of these places one encounters the same distinctive mode of representation, in which the objects represented (usually animals) are split and reorganised to form a different kind of being. H. G. Creel describes this procedure with respect to the decoration of bronze in the Shang period: 'It is as if one took the animal and split it lengthwise, starting at the tip of the tail and carrying the operation almost, not quite, to the tip of the nose, then the two halves are pulled apart and the bisected animal is laid out flat on the surface, the two halves joined only at the tip of the nose' (as cited Lévi-Strauss 1963a: 249–51; 1958: 274–5). This splitting takes in particular one characteristic form: the representation of the front view of an animal (usually the head) by two joined profiles. This is illustrated very well by the Tsimshian design called 'bears meeting', analysed by Franz Boas in his seminal book *Primitive Art* (Lévi-Strauss 1963a: 249; 1958: 275).

Lévi-Strauss proposes to view Caduveo body painting as a form of split representation, one in which it is the human face, upon which the designs are placed, that is split and reassembled as two profiles. (When asked by Lévi-Strauss to draw one of her designs on a sheet of paper, a Caduveo woman began by tracing the outline of a face. She represented it with a deep declivity in the middle of the forehead. Lévi-Strauss sees this as

³ Photographs of the doll were reproduced in volume 6 of *Minotaure* published in 1934–5.



Illustration 3: 'Bears Meeting'. Drawing by Claude Lévi-Strauss based on a traditional design by the Tsimshian of British Columbia.

evidence that this Caduveo painter conceived of the face that she was about to paint as made up of joined profiles.⁴)

The value of Lévi-Strauss's analysis of Caduveo body art from an aesthetic point of view lies in part in the way that it brings to light the complex and ambivalent relationship between its graphic and plastic elements. On the one hand it is a relation of opposition, in the sense that the designs modify the structure of the face, distort it in a quasi sadistic manner. On the other, according to Caduveo belief, it is only by being painted that the face acquires its specifically human dignity and spiritual significance (1963a: 261; 1958: 288). Lévi-Strauss narrates an anecdote told by the Jesuit missionary Sanchez Labrador. When asked why they painted themselves, the Caduveo are alleged to have replied that unpainted human beings are 'stupid', indistinguishable from mere animals (1963a: 257–8; 1958: 283). As Lévi-Strauss shows very well, the designs 'make' the face, which the Caduveo believe is predestined to receive them: unpainted, human beings are incomplete. The designs are interpreted in indigenous culture as the imprint on the human body of a supernatural order, which constitutes something like a template for the order that exists in the here and now.

⁴ The sharp cleft in the foreheads of Olmec supernatural beings has been interpreted as denoting a jaguar or toad, whose skulls are naturally indented in this way (Miller 2001: 19). A similar explanation may also be suggested for this Caduveo drawing, which one could therefore interpret as evidence not of 'split representation' but of animistic beliefs.

Previous interpretations of 'split representation' were either diffusionist or functionalist. The former sought to explain the recurrence of split representation by trying to trace how the various cultures using it may have borrowed it from one another. The functionalist interpretation, put forward by Franz Boas, was that split representation arose as a result of the transposition to flat surfaces of methods of representation developed for the decoration of three-dimensional objects (one way of representing an animal on a box is to dislocate it so that each side of the box presents a different view of the animal). Lévi-Strauss's underlying objection to both kinds of explanation is that they leave unanswered the most important question: *why* a given culture should adopt and maintain a particular style or method of decoration. As he puts it, 'External connections can explain transmission, but only internal connections can account for persistence' (1963a: 258; 1958: 284). Diffusionist and functionalist explanations, taken on their own, are always insufficient. They need to be supplemented, Lévi-Strauss argues, by psychological explanations.

One of the conclusions reached in the second essay on Caduveo body painting is that split representation is the product of societies – usually highly hierarchical societies – that espouse a particular kind of dualistic conception of personhood, one that does not simply oppose the biological self to the cultural self but establishes between them the same relationship of interdependency that Caduveo art establishes between its graphic and plastic elements. In other words, the *reason* why a given society adopts a 'split' form of representation must be sought in that society's systems of beliefs (its ideology). Lévi-Strauss argues that split representation occurs in societies that construe personhood according to the paradigm of the mask, which Lévi-Strauss explains by means of another metaphor, that of the duality of the actor and his (or her) role (1963a: 261–2; 1958: 288). In one sense, the role is made for the actor who takes it on, in the way that one might wear a mask. But on the other, it is only through his or her role that the actor exists, just as the designs painted onto the face of the Caduveo women 'make' the face. In sociological terms, the actor's role, or the mask, is a human being's social identity (masks literally identify rank, clanic affiliations, etc.) which is not something simply 'added' to the biological self but, as Lévi-Strauss puts it, the costume by means of which every human being is projected onto the social stage (1963a: 262–3; 1958: 290). In other words, it is by taking on a social identity that each of us exists as a social being, becomes a 'person'. In this context Lévi-Strauss interprets the splitting of the face in Caduveo art quite literally as a graphic representation of a mask (1963a: 263–4; 1958: 291).

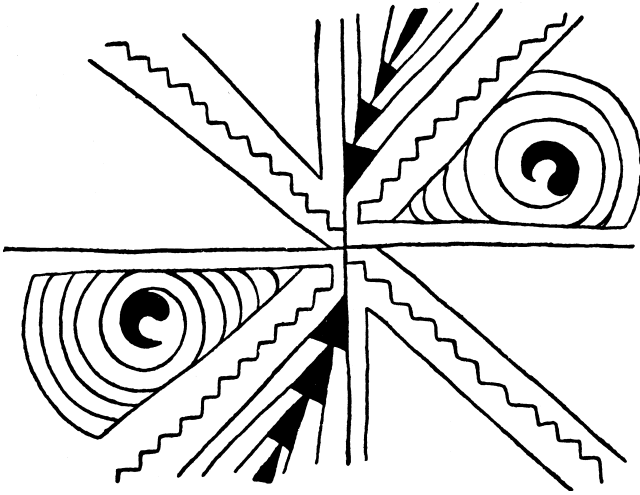


Illustration 4: 'Caduveo Design' (1935). Caduveo facial design reproduced on paper by a Caduveo woman. Collected by Claude Lévi-Strauss.

In the final essay on Caduveo body painting (chapter xx of *Tristes Tropiques*), Lévi-Strauss finds yet another level of meaning to the facial designs. The three Caduveo essays taken as a whole may be read as an extended meditation on the uses of asymmetry. In Caduveo art, the human face is divided according to two apparently conflicting sets of principles. The patterns are distributed, on the one hand, in relationship to a vertical and a horizontal axis which divides the face into four symmetrical quarters. In addition to this, an oblique axis also cuts across the face from the top left-hand side to the bottom right-hand side (it should be noted that not all designs follow this pattern, which is presented as a basic type). This introduces a chiasmic twist into an otherwise symmetrical pattern, a twist that is crucial at once to the dislocating function of this art and to its sociological significance. The end product is a tension between symmetry and asymmetry which Lévi-Strauss sees as a key to the distinctive style of Caduveo art. As Lévi-Strauss observes, the result is something that has few parallels, except perhaps in the designs placed on playing cards.

In his final essay in *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss returns to these formal features and reinterprets them in the light of an argument that is a mix of structuralism, Freud and Marx. Caduveo society, at the time of Lévi-Strauss's visit, was divided into three castes that were on the verge of disintegrating into separate social structures. The neighbouring Mbaya

possessed a similar caste system but its tendency to disaggregate was compensated by the existence of a moiety system that cut across the caste system. In other words, and to make explicit the connection with the formal structure of the Caduveo designs, the social structures of the Mbaya populations consisted in a careful balance between the asymmetrical caste system and the symmetrical moiety system.

In short, in *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss interprets the Caduveo designs as a representation of Caduveo social institutions; or rather they are a representation of the institutions that the Caduveo lacked or were unable to have, those that had been developed by the Mbaya. The facial designs are, in this sense, the expression of a collective wish. And the function of this wish is, perversely, to maintain the status quo and perpetuate inequality. The solution that the Mbaya enacted, the Caduveo were only able to dream of in their art. The Caduveo lesson, here, is that art plays a key role in the production and maintenance of social structures.

THE REFORMATION OF NATURE

Let us start to unpack some of the broader aesthetic issues raised by Lévi-Strauss's studies of Caduveo body painting. I have argued in this book that the journey of anthropological understanding often takes the form of a chiasmic switching of positions, one in which the unfamiliar is made familiar and, as a necessary corollary of this first movement, the familiar is made unfamiliar. The 'near' and the 'far' are often interconnected; they may even, at times, come to reflect one another, as long as one does not think of such a reflection as the reproduction of an *identical* image, but rather as the interplay of a multiplicity of *differing* images, at once familiar and strange. If one is to look again at Lévi-Strauss's essays on Caduveo body painting, it becomes apparent that this art form does indeed reflect, in this way, Western artistic practices.

For the modern reader viewing Caduveo body painting through the prism of the history of Western art, what comes to the fore is its ambiguous position on the borderline between two-dimensional and three-dimensional systems of representation. At first inspection, Caduveo art may appear as a purely graphic art, whose purpose is the adornment of the body. However, the above formal analysis of the designs reveals that the human body does not simply constitute a *surface* that the artist paints, the flesh and bones equivalent of a canvas. As we have seen, the body is transformed – *dislocated* (split) – by the designs placed upon it (this is the specific function that Lévi-Strauss assigns to asymmetry in these designs).

The designs and the bodies they 'decorate' form a whole. Caduveo art is *at once* a graphic and a plastic (sculptural) art, although here it is human bodies – those of the Caduveo women – that provide the 'plastic' element. Indeed, in many ways, what Lévi-Strauss's analysis shows is that the transformed body *is* the artwork. In this respect, far from being made up of purely abstract designs, Caduveo art may be related to figurative art, although it is an atypical figurative art-form, first because it is living bodies that provide the 'figurative' element and second because it is an art that *disfigures* at the same time as it figures. As Lévi-Strauss puts it: 'this painting, instead of representing the image of a deformed face, actually deforms a real face' (1963a: 255; 1958: 279). Caduveo art may in fact be seen as a kind of mimesis in reverse: instead of extracting from pre-existing 'nature' a duplicate image of nature, it applies pre-existing 'unnatural' abstract forms to nature – the human body – with the view of distorting or undoing it.

In his seminal essay 'Minimal Art' (1968), in which the term minimalism is said to have been coined for the first time, philosopher Richard Wollheim reflects on the creative act as a form of work. On the one hand, such 'work', he says, is undoubtedly 'constructive': it involves a long and patient series of 'nonrepetitive' actions (e.g. brush-strokes) whereby the artist elaborates a highly individuated object that differs recognisably from its real-life model. But Wollheim also makes a case for a different kind of work that is not constructive but destructive, a work that minimalism has taken to its furthest extreme. He writes about the artistic image: 'the image before us, Parmigiano's or Picasso's, is the result of the partial obliteration or simplifying of a more complex image that enjoyed some kind of shadowy pre-existence, and upon which the artist has gone to work . . . In minimalism . . . the work of destruction has been ruthlessly complete' (Wollheim 1968: 398). Caduveo art may also be seen, from the decentred vantage point of Western art, in terms of a privileging of a work of destruction inherent in the 'creative' process (in many ways, modernist art has turned this work of destruction into its own subject matter). The originality of Caduveo body painting, in this respect, is that it is the human body itself, not the canvas or the sculpture, that is the support of the work of destruction. In this respect at least, the Caduveo seem to have gone further than either Bacon or Picasso.

It will have become apparent that what Lévi-Strauss is working through in his 1945 essay on Caduveo body painting is something more fundamental than an analysis of the art of this particular Brazilian population. What he is working through is a general definition of the creative act but one that

he would not come to formulate until the *Conversations* with Charbonnier, published in 1961.

By 'undoing' the natural symmetry of the human face, the Caduveo designs substitute one kind of order – a cultural order created by human beings – in place of another – a natural order. The designs dislocate the body to recompose it, as Lévi-Strauss puts it: 'according to conventional rules having *nothing to do with nature*' (1963a: 253; 1958: 278, my italics). A new whole is created, whose parts are related not by some inherent natural principle, but by virtue of an *external* (i.e. artificial) one that transcends nature: 'the . . . face is . . . dislocated . . . by the systematic asymmetry by means of which its natural harmony is denied on behalf of the artificial harmony of the painting' (1963a: 255; 1958: 279). Thus, Caduveo art creates, as Lévi-Strauss puts it, 'an arbitrary individual' (1963a: 254; 1958: 278).

These insights into Caduveo art will coalesce, in the *Conversations* with Georges Charbonnier, and give rise to the basic proposition that the creative act brings about a passage from nature to culture (although the *Conversations* do not mention the studies of Caduveo art, they seem to extract the general theory implicit in them). This is expressed on three occasions:

- 1 'art constitutes to the highest degree that take-over ('prise de possession') of nature by culture which is essentially the type of phenomenon studied by anthropologists' (Lévi-Strauss 1969b: 107; 1961: 130).
- 2 'it seems to me that what we call aesthetic emotion is linked – or rather, is the way in which we react when a non-significant object is promoted to the role of signifier . . . The true function of aesthetic transposition or promotion is to raise to the level of signification something which did not exist in this mode or form in its raw state' (1969b: 123–4; 1961: 150).
- 3 '[The artist] is someone who "aspires" the object into language . . . what . . . occurs . . . is a process of extraction or aspiration which turns the object from a natural into a cultural entity. It is in this sense that . . . the typical phenomenon which interests the anthropologist, i.e. the relationship between nature and culture and the transition from one to the other, is particularly well exemplified in art' (Lévi-Strauss 1969b: 124; 1961: 150).

These aesthetic propositions, which I will later try to get beyond, are clearly of prime importance to the development of Lévi-Strauss's thought, since they provide the means of theoretically connecting the anthropological and aesthetic dimensions of his intellectual project. They also tell us something more about Lévi-Strauss. The British sculptor Michael Ayrton, once a student of Henry Moore, had a predilection for the figure of the Minotaur, a being that is part-human, part-beast. One of his sculptures depicts a kneeling Minotaur, staring down at the palm of its extended

hand, as if the part that is bull in the Minotaur had suddenly recognised its own dawning humanity and become lost in its contemplation. One may see in this image a fitting emblem of Lévi-Strauss who, like the Minotaur, is fascinated by the boundary that divides the animal from the human, nature from culture, a boundary he cannot take his eyes off, yet is never quite able to grasp. For the Lévi-Strauss of the *Conversations*, art does not simply convert nature into culture; it provides a *privileged access* to the process of conversion, otherwise hidden from view. Aesthetic emotion is construed, here, as a by-product of the spectacle, provided by art, of this transitional moment. Art achieves a scopophilic satisfaction. Revealingly, it is by means of subtly eroticised corporeal metaphor that Lévi-Strauss describes the passage from nature to culture in the *Conversations*, which becomes a 'prise de possession', a ravishing of nature by culture. The moment when the one becomes the other constitutes, in Lévi-Strauss's system of thought, the intellectual equivalent of a primal scene.

Having connected the essays on Caduveo body painting to the above aesthetic generalisations taken from the later text of the *Conversations*, other connections come to light, this time with Lévi-Strauss's earlier work on kinship. The generalisations about art put forward in the *Conversations* assign to the act of aesthetic creation (aesthetic 'promotion') a similar function to that which he assigns to the incest taboo in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Lévi-Strauss sees the incest taboo in positive terms as the means of bringing about exogamy. By prohibiting certain categories of kin, the incest taboo forces men to find women in other, more distant social groups, thereby constructing a broader social network. The incest taboo brings about a *regulation* of sexual relations, absent in the animal kingdom. More specifically, it dictates that sexual relations should take the form of a reciprocal exchange of women. Nature creates the need for a union but does not prescribe its form; it does not provide a rule for differentiating between acceptable and prohibited partners. With the formulation of the incest taboo and the setting in motion of the reciprocal exchange of women, culture imposes on nature a new order, a cultural order, in much the same way that Caduveo designs impose a man-made order on the natural shapes of the human body.

The act of aesthetic creation, as seen from the vantage point of the Charbonnier interviews, replicates or echoes the founding gesture by which a cultural order distinct from nature was once created. Lévi-Strauss says about the incest taboo that it is in neither nature nor culture. Rather, it is 'the fundamental step because of which, by which, but above all in which, the transition from nature to culture is accomplished' (1969a: 24; 1967a: 29).

This 'fundamental step' provides Lévi-Strauss with a prototype for the creative act. Art preserves the memory of this inaugural divide. It is worth citing, here, a little-known text by Lévi-Strauss, a preface that he wrote for the catalogue of an exhibition on masks held at the Musée Guimet in 1959. It condenses many strands of Lévi-Strauss's thinking in a highly revealing passage, one that combines the above aesthetic concerns with a reflection on the nature of masks which, as we have already seen, is central to his interpretation of Caduveo body art. It is also worth noting that Lévi-Strauss presents masks, here, as forms of 'modèle réduit'. He writes:

In cosmetic there is cosmos; and it is not by chance that the word 'mask' has been introduced in the vocabulary of beauty salons. A 'bushy' hair style has always presented the image of nature in a wild and rebellious state, similar to that, described by myths, prior to the creation of man and the birth of society. When the elegant woman has her hair done, when she 'masks' her face with cream, powder and various dyes, when she *rectifies* irregular lines with her brush and pencil *to give them a style*, although she may not be aware of it, she is carrying out on her face – a universe in miniature – the gestures of the Demiurge, organising the cosmos, destroying monsters and introducing the arts of civilisation. (1989: 179, my translation)

The above conception of the creative act, as a conversion of nature into culture, the 'raw' object into a sign, is an anthropological version of a well-established way of thinking about art, whose sources can be traced to the philosophers of classical antiquity and in particular Aristotle. A more recent antecedent is to be found in Baudelaire. I do not have the space to develop this connection here, so I will simply cite a passage from his 'In Praise of Cosmetics', to which the title of Lévi-Strauss's first essay on Caduveo body painting, 'Indian Cosmetics', alludes, as does the above passage on masks. Baudelaire's 'In Praise of Cosmetics' is contained in his famous essay 'The Painter of Modern Life', on Constantin Guys, where he writes: 'Fashion should thus be considered as . . . a sublime deformation of Nature, or rather a permanent and repeated attempt at her *reformation*' (2003a: 33). For Baudelaire, cosmetics partake in the very essence of beauty in as much as they are an expression of what, for him, all art should be, namely a 'repudiation of nature' (I am borrowing the phrase from F. W. Leakey's book, *Baudelaire and Nature*).⁵ The definition that the nineteenth-century art critic Charles Blanc gives of the notion of 'style' also applies very well to Caduveo

⁵ The Caduveo, as described by Lévi-Strauss, seem to share the Baudelairean dandy's 'horror' of nature. Lévi-Strauss notes, for example, their 'dislike for procreation', as expressed in the common practice of abortion and, occasionally, infanticide (1963b: 162; 1955a: 208).

body art and the structural theory of aesthetic creation: 'style', he writes, 'is the imprint of human thought on nature'. This echoes a definition of art attributed by Valéry to Degas, thought to be repeating Zola who was himself thought to be repeating Bacon: 'Homo additus naturae' (Valéry 1998a: 207). One might also have quoted Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*: 'This kind of *deviation from nature* is perhaps the most pleasant meal for human pride; for its sake man loves art as the expression of a lofty, heroic unnaturalness and convention . . . Here nature is *supposed* to be contradicted' (2001: 80).⁶

My working-hypothesis in this chapter is that the Caduveo essays lie at a junction in the development of Lévi-Strauss's thought. In these essays, he seems to be 'working through' two closely related yet conflicting conceptions of art and aesthetic creation, conceptions that vary according to the status that Lévi-Strauss accords to the nature/culture dichotomy.⁷ On the one hand, these essays point towards the aesthetic generalisations, outlined above, contained in the interviews with Georges Charbonnier. Here, the nature/culture dichotomy is credited with an objective value: it is used to designate different realms that exist and can be identified, in principle at least, in 'external' reality (one may pass from one to the other). In other words it corresponds to a working ontological distinction that underpins Lévi-Strauss's system of thought. This first itinerary through Lévi-Strauss's works also leads, beyond the Charbonnier interviews, to the 'Overture' of the *Mythologiques*, where the nature/culture dichotomy, taken in the above sense, becomes the linchpin that holds together Lévi-Strauss's theory of the interrelationship between the arts, in particular painting, music and myth (see below).

However, there is another conception of art implicit in Lévi-Strauss's Caduveo essays which points in a different direction, towards a mythopoetic view of art, one that treats the nature/culture dichotomy as 'an artificial creation of culture' – the words are Lévi-Strauss's (1969a: XXIX; 1967a: XVII).⁸ The *Mythologiques* series is concerned with the many *different* ways in which Amerindian populations have, locally, represented the nature/culture dichotomy in myths. More importantly, in the present context, they are concerned with *where* different populations have placed

⁶ The context is Nietzsche's discussion of the Athenian love of 'good speech'.

⁷ For a detailed discussion of the different values Lévi-Strauss attaches to the nature/culture dichotomy, see Descola 2004.

⁸ An important footnote in *The Savage Mind* offers the following explanation: 'The opposition between nature and culture to which I attached much importance at one time . . . now seems to be of primarily methodological importance' (1966b: 247; 1962b: 294). Despite this disclaimer, and other 'rectifications', Lévi-Strauss is never quite able to resolve this ambiguity.

the divide. In the opening section of *The Raw and the Cooked* Lévi-Strauss analyses a series of myths told by three neighbouring populations, the Bororo, the Gé and the Tupi. All three deal, in their own way, with the theme of the origin of fire. Various heroes steal fire from animals; in the Gé series it is stolen from a jaguar who is thereby condemned to eating his food raw. In the Tupi series, it is stolen from vultures who are condemned to eating their food rotten (they become scavengers). Both series of myths evoke the passage from a state of affairs when humans and animals were not differentiated to one in which they are, a passage that corresponds to the institution of a social order. But the point of transition is different for the Tupi and the Gé. The functional opposition for the Tupi, who trace the origin of fire to vultures, is that between cooked food and rotten food. For the Gé, for whom a jaguar was the original guardian of fire, it is that between cooked food and raw food. As Lévi-Strauss explains: 'the dividing line between nature and culture is different, according to whether we are considering the Ge or the Tupi myths: in the former it separates the cooked from the raw; in the latter it separates the raw from the rotten. For the Ge, then, the raw + rotten relation is a natural category, whereas for the Tupi the raw + cooked relation is a cultural category' (1970: 143; 1964a: 152).

My point, here, is that the boundary between nature and culture may be drawn and redrawn in different places. It is variable. The divide is constructed *through* Amerindian mythological discourse. It follows that it corresponds no longer to ontological categories that are operative in Lévi-Strauss's system of thought but to categories in the systems of representation of the populations studied by him. Viewing Caduveo body painting from the perspective of Amerindian myth, what comes to the fore is not so much the way it converts nature into culture, as the generalisations of the Charbonnier interviews would have it, but the way in which the act of marking the skin makes visible a borderline, albeit a fictional one. The focal point of Caduveo art, from this perspective, is the interstice between the skin surface and the designs applied to it; symbolically, the place where nature and culture meet. Beyond the culturally specific meaning of the designs, it is this point that they designate. The dividing line between the two domains, however, has no prior existence in 'external' reality. It is generated at the level of the symbol. It exists only as representation. My contention is that certain forms of avant-garde art fulfil a mytho-poetic function in as much as they too partake in this symbolic boundary-drawing process, in this attempt at marking out the limits of neighbouring domains.

FROM CADUVEO BODY PAINTING TO THE READYMADE

In the Charbonnier interviews, Lévi-Strauss expresses his 'unease' (1969b: 88; 1961: 107) with the artistic invention that, at the dawn of the twentieth century, stood art on its head, marking a new turning point in the artistic revolution associated with modernism (the readymade, which paved the way for later developments such as minimalism, pop art and installation art, in fact already anticipates post-modernism). For Charbonnier, when Duchamp displayed his *Bottlerack* (1914), he created a work of art by decontextualising the object, bringing about a fission between the object and what it once signified. By removing the object from the cellar where it was used to dry bottles and placing it in his studio and then a gallery, Duchamp split the signifier and the signified that made up the *Bottlerack*. The act of displaying made the object once again *unfamiliar* – one might say, returning it to nature. As a result, for Charbonnier, the value of the readymade as a work of art is that 'reality itself [is] accepted by man as a work of art' (1969b: 98; 1961: 118); 'if the artist disappears, the lesson to be learnt is perhaps that reality itself is a work of art' (1969b: 94; 1961: 114).

What Lévi-Strauss fundamentally objects to in Charbonnier's theory of the readymade is that it collapses the distance between the object and the work of art construed as a sign of the object; it confuses nature and culture. With the readymade, in particular the 'pure' readymade, the act of 'creation' consists simply in choosing and displaying the object.⁹ The object itself does not undergo a 'transmutation'. There is no equivalent to the shaping of the marble block or the combining of colours on the canvas. The work of art *is* the 'raw object', which deliberately resists 'promotion' to a higher plane of semiotic existence.

For Lévi-Strauss, however, there must always be, as we have seen in the previous chapter, a 'profound homology' (1969b: 89; 1961: 108) between the structure of the work of art and the structure of the object it signifies. As Lévi-Strauss says about Ingres: 'it seems to me that Ingres's secret is that he could give the illusion of a fac-simile (we need only think of his Cashmere shawls reproduced with all the most minute details of design and shades of colour) while at the same time the apparent fac-simile reveals a signification which goes far beyond perception and even extends to the structure of the object of perception' (1966b: 90; 1962b: 109). With the readymade, where the real object is made to stand tautologically for itself, the structure

⁹ Some readymades did involve minimal modifications, such as the addition of a signature (that of Duchamp or of one of his pseudonyms) or the combining of parts taken from different objects.

of the signifier and that of the signified are, *by definition*, identical. There seems to be no room for the cognitive process whereby an object's hidden properties are brought to light.

Lévi-Strauss does find a way of allowing certain readymades to fulfil a function analogous to that of Ingres's cashmere shawls. Duchamp's act of displaying an object initially splits the object from what it signifies. But this is only the first stage in a more complex process whereby the object is then associated to other new signifiers, a function that Duchamp has himself sometimes attributed to his titles. Once the object is divorced from its function it becomes possible to perceive, via a series of free associations, the object's hidden relationship to a series of other objects – for example, in the case of the *Bottlerack*, says Lévi-Strauss, the skeleton of a fish. And, as a result of these associations, which bring about what Lévi-Strauss calls 'a [readjustment] of the relationship between signifier and signified' (1969b: 93; 1961: 112)¹⁰, latent properties or qualities inherent in the bottle-rack that are not normally perceived, such as its *bizarrerie* or its aggressiveness, are brought to light. After the exhibition, the viewer should have a better knowledge of what a bottlerack is.

Although Lévi-Strauss's analysis is in many ways a penetrating one, it resolves the contradiction at the heart of the readymade, turning it unambiguously into art by assimilating its function to that of traditional mimetic art. The readymade challenges his assumption that art converts nature into culture and it is this message that the above arguments seek to neutralise. What Lévi-Strauss does not sufficiently acknowledge in the Charbonnier interviews – perhaps cannot, given his theoretical premises – is that the value of the readymade resides in its contradictory nature. As Duchamp famously put it, it is a work of art without an artist to make it. Art historians (Ades et al. 1999: 146) have pointed out that Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) was a half-satirical response to Boccioni's 'Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture' (1912). But whereas Boccioni made sculptures that used traditional illusionist means to *represent* movement, Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* incorporated real movement. What makes the 'artistic' value of the readymade is precisely what makes it a problematic object for Lévi-Strauss to grasp with the concepts he uses in the Charbonnier interviews: it is an object that belongs at once inside and outside of art. Indeed, *its function is to throw into sharp relief the problematic nature of the borderline between art and non-art, representation and reality and, by extension, nature and culture*. And it is in this respect that it

¹⁰ I have amended the translation.

fulfils, like Caduveo body painting, a mytho-poetic function. Its value resides in its problematic status as an artefact. The readymade displaces art towards what Michael Fried calls 'objecthood', a gesture that minimalists such as Judd and Stella would later exploit more fully.¹¹ In the process it makes visible a boundary that had previously been taken for granted, that between art (the realm of the sign) and non-art (the realm of 'things'). However, compared to Caduveo body painting, this boundary-marking process has a very different value. Whereas Caduveo art *affirms* a difference, the readymade aims to *negate* one. Its mytho-poetic function is in the service of a critical purpose (it is indeed meta-art); it is the means of a radical interrogation of the domain of art, its conditions of possibility and hence its limits – limits that are brought to light by the very act of transgressing them.¹² What the readymade 'displays' and simultaneously deconstructs are the distinctions that have traditionally underpinned 'art', among them the distinction between mere objects (whether mechanically produced or 'natural'; Duchamp in effect treats the former as if they were the latter) and artefacts. In the past, it was from this second category of objects that candidates for the status of art-work were exclusively selected.

As Lévi-Strauss reminds us in the Charbonnier interviews (Lévi-Strauss 1969b: 98–9; 1961: 118–19), Duchamp was not the first to display found objects. His gesture may be related to the late eighteenth-century vogue of the curiosity-cabinet. More generally, it echoes the many artists who have collected objects found in nature. Lévi-Strauss cites the sixteenth-century Florentine Mannerist sculptor Benvenuto Cellini, who recounts in his memoirs how he would wander the beaches in search of shells and other objects that had been shaped by the sea. These objects, like Duchamp's, also have a problematic status. Part of the interest in these kinds of objects lies in the way in which nature has imitated art. The twisted pieces of driftwood, the polished pebbles, resemble crafted objects, but they have been crafted directly by nature, not culture. They are the equivalent, in the

¹¹ Clement Greenberg writes: 'the Minimalists . . . commit themselves to the third dimension because it is . . . a coordinate that art has to share with non-art (as Dada, Duchamp and others already saw). The ostensible aim of the Minimalists is to "project" objects and ensembles of objects that are just nudgeable into art' (1968: 183).

¹² The modalities of the fulfilling of the mytho-poetic function are culturally relative. Its purpose is essentially 'conservative' in the case of Caduveo art, a traditional art form that perpetuates a relatively stable style which itself serves to legitimise a certain social order. On the contrary, with the readymade, the mytho-poetic function is put in the service of a subversive aesthetic and social purpose. My interpretation of the readymade rejoins here art-historical interpretations, such as those put forward by Peter Bürger, which stress the way in which the avant-garde 'negated the preconditions for "affirmative", autonomous art: the disjunction of art and life' (Gibson 1996: 161).

lexicon of Amerindian mythological symbols, of honey: an ambiguous category of food which, like cooked food, is ready for human consumption, but that has been prepared – ‘cooked’ – by nature itself.

Duchamp’s readymades at once mimic and parody these earlier ‘found objects’. The key difference, here, is that Duchamp’s readymades were invariably manufactured objects, products of culture, not nature (he distinguishes, in his *Green Book*, between the ‘readyfound’ and the mass produced ‘readymade’). But *Bottlerack* or his *Bicycle Wheel* are also washed up objects of sorts, found not on beaches but in Parisian backstreets or bric à brac shops. Here, it is not the natural forces of the sea that have shaped them, but factory machines which, by implication, have been endowed with the same autonomous powers of creation as their natural counterparts.

In his influential book *Art and Agency*, anthropologist Alfred Gell analyses the many different ways in which artefacts, and in particular works of art, embody complex forms of agency. He uses the notion of ‘indexing’. As he puts it: ‘Artefacts have the capacity to index their “origins” in an act of *manufacture*. Any artefact, by virtue of being a manufactured thing, motivates an abduction which specifies the identity of the agent who made or originated it’ (Gell 1998: 23). He gives the example of a chipped stone found on a beach, which he identifies as a handaxe. This chipped stone indexes (‘makes present’, as it were) not only its maker’s agency but also that of its users and, once displayed by Gell on his mantelpiece, Gell’s own agency. In the case of the natural ‘readyfound’ object, such as Cellini’s driftwood, the manufacturer is absent. His/her agency, however, is anthropomorphically displaced onto nature and assimilated to a natural process. Nature becomes the artist. With Duchamp’s readymades, this agency is further displaced onto culture, and assimilated to the anonymous forces of mass-production shaping the new urban environment. The machine becomes the artist.

This displacement of agency is at the core of the machine-aesthetics endorsed by Boccioni in his 1912 ‘Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture’. Boccioni writes: ‘We cannot forget that the . . . opening and closing of two cogwheels . . . the fury of a flywheel or the turbine of a propeller are all plastic and pictorial elements of which a Futurist sculpture must take account. The opening and closing of a valve creates a rhythm just as beautiful but infinitely newer than the blinking of an animal eyelid.’ With the industrial revolution, the landscapes painted by Duchamp’s predecessors become *urban* landscapes, the forces that shaped them mechanised ones. In one sense, this reduced the domain of nature. But Boccioni’s manifesto suggests another reading of this transformation: culture itself started to play the part of nature, that of an

autonomous and invisible force (the atom bomb is an extreme example of the way in which nature, in the post-industrial era, was appropriated and instrumentalised by human beings). Culture becomes nature's double, which is in part what Duchamp is expressing in an interview with Schwarz, where he compares the pleasure of looking at *Bicycle Wheel* turning to 'looking at the flames dancing in a fireplace' (as cited Archer 2002: 146).

According to structural anthropology, mythical schemas constitute something like an instrument for speculatively manipulating the categories in terms of which a given society, or social group, constructs a model of the world. Much avant-grade art, including Duchamp's readymades, constitutes instruments of this kind. They are not rooted in narrative schemas, although some may include narratives, but find their support in complex sensory objects: systems of colours, textures, forms, moving parts, sounds even. These provide another (post-mythical) means of testing an order of the world, of exploring its limits and potentialities. These objects – at least as seen through an anthropological lens – are a modern-day version of speculative cosmology, i.e. a form of thinking about the world as a whole. And like their mythological counterparts, these art forms illustrate the recurring role assigned to the nature/culture dichotomy in this attempt at a total representation. Let us take another reexample.

In the 1960s the English sculptor Anthony Caro, who had once made figurative bronzes, turned to abstract sculpture. His *Prairie* (1967) is a horizontal plane made up of four parallel tubes, supported by plates and blocks. Writing about Caro's sculptural work in general, Michael Fried remarks that it is meaningful by virtue of the juxtapositions it creates between its constitutive elements (Fried 1968: 116–47). These form systems of relations. In a typically structuralist fashion, there is a primacy of the relations over the elements that are being related. To alter any element of the sculpture would transform the whole. Each element counts because it is part of a syntax (1968: 137–8).¹³ Fried cites Greenberg, for whom this concentration on syntax amounts to 'an emphasis on abstractness, on radical unlikeness to nature' (1968: 138). In what sense does this object function mytho-poetically?

Although abstract, Caro's sculpture does maintain a number of recognisable ties with the prairie its title designates. Like a prairie, it is yellow

¹³ Fried presents Caro's sculptures as the antithesis of minimalist three-dimensional pieces, which deliberately avoid complexity and composition so that the object is taken in as a single block. Minimal art deliberately espoused objecthood, which is fundamentally what Fried does not like about it.

and consists in a horizontal expanse. In this respect it is not totally abstract. Rather, it appears to explore a borderline between figuration and abstraction, seeking out, as it were, a minimal unit of denotation, the most economical way of signifying a prairie, sculpturally, without representing one. Like Caduveo body painting, *Prairie* seems to capture nature in the net of an abstract system. Just as the Caduveo designs dematerialise the bodies upon which they are painted, giving them their spiritual significance, Caro's sculpture reduces a prairie to a simple geometrical form. Both forms of art are akin to a kind of distillation. Although abstract, this particular sculpture has not, therefore, entirely turned its back on the world of things. In many ways, it manages to capture the very essence of a prairie, namely its horizontality. Although it does not 'represent' a prairie, it is still biomorphic.

As well as the formal juxtapositions between its constitutive elements noted by Fried, the sculpture thus also gives rise to another juxtaposition which is inherent in the way in which it works as a sign, a juxtaposition between the nature of the signifier and that of the signified that make up that sign. The former, an assemblage of abstract geometrical shapes made solely out of manufactured materials, connotes culture, while the latter (the prairie) denotes nature. In one sense, Caro's sculpture does indeed signify by virtue of being removed from nature; it seeks out the greatest possible distance from the natural world ('radical unlikeness to nature'). But in a round about way, it also provides a route back to nature, albeit one that goes via abstraction. The juxtaposition of signifier and signified is more complicated than may first appear to be the case. It is not a mere opposition. Caro's sculpture may be viewed, mytho-poetically at least, as a kind of equation. It juxtaposes the natural world of the prairie to the artificial world created by the artist, but as if to say: they are 'translatable' into one another. Caro's sculpture reduces a prairie to its geometrical essence: its planar mode of existence. In doing so it re-creates – like the figurative image but by different means – a certain experience of a prairie.

I have reached a point in my argument where it has become necessary to elaborate the notion of the mytho-poetic function. What is the nature of the domains that it seeks to delimit, domains that I have designated, so far, by the terms 'nature' and 'culture'? The practical anthropological answer – that nature is the domain of biological heredity and culture that of learnt behaviour – belies a more complex answer that is perhaps more relevant for an understanding of art. What these terms denote are orders of events corresponding to different types of causality. To characterise these types of causality, one may usefully turn to the work of philosopher Clément Rosset. As he shows very well, in mainstream Western thought (this model

would need to be altered for other systems of thought) the realm of nature is essentially the realm of that which happens 'of its own accord' – 'spontaneously' (1986: 240), to use Rosset's terminology. By contrast, the realm of culture is the realm of a causality related to free will (i.e. human action), a causality that is – allegedly – independent of the laws of nature. This distinction is inseparable from another: some entities contain their developmental principle, as it were, *in themselves* (natural entities), while others are the product of some *external* principle or finality (the distinction is particularly important for anthropology, which purports to study *external* tradition). As Aristotle puts it in his *Physics*: 'Some things exist by nature, others are due to other causes. Natural objects include animals and their parts, plants and simple bodies like earth, fire, air, and water . . . The obvious difference between all these things and things which are not natural is that each of the natural ones contains within itself a source of change and of stability . . . On the other hand, something like a bed . . . has no intrinsic impulse for change' (Aristotle 1999: 33). This idea is developed in *On the Generation of Animals*: 'Heat and cold make the iron hard and soft, but the *sword* is made by the instruments' movement which contains a definition belonging to art. For the art is source and form of the product, but in another thing; but the movement of nature is in the thing itself' (Aristotle 1972: 61).

We have already seen how Duchamp's readymades manipulate these ideas and the beliefs attendant to them, ideas that have structured the Western understanding of art. As Rosset shows very well in *L'Anti-nature*, the idea of nature is inseparable from the desire for a cause and principle inherent in living organisms – that which makes grass grow. The idea of nature, taken in this sense, provides the background against which human action and freedom take on meaning, are rescued from a purely arbitrary account of existence. By blurring the difference between these two kinds of actions, or causes, the readymade, or at least the readyfound, which paradoxically belongs to the realm of that which happens 'of its own accord' (i.e. the very opposite of an artefact), questions man's ability to carve out a separate realm for himself by acting *upon* nature.

Rosset's critique of what he calls the 'naturalist illusion' suggests that one needs to complicate the dualistic schema that has been used so far, and add other types of causality to those considered above, among them chance.¹⁴ According to Rosset, the realm in which chance is sovereign is

¹⁴ In the case of the Caduveo, one would also need to consider magical, or supernatural, forms of causality. In as much as the Caduveo facial designs express the belief that what happens in the here and now reflects a supernatural order, they imbricate human, natural and supernatural causal chains.

that of matter. 'Matter is chance: a mode of existence that is not only independent from human productions, but also indifferent to any principle or law' (Rosset 1986: 11, my translation). Matter is neither nature nor culture, or, rather, it subsumes both. For Rosset, the falling stone does not so much connote an 'obedience' to the law of gravity, but an irreducible principle of inertia (1986: 12). In 'naturalist' philosophies 'nature', 'artifice' and 'chance' form the points of a conceptual triangle that hold the illusion of the existence of nature in place. As Rosset puts it: 'Between the gesture of the stone abandoning itself to its own weight and that of human action, there is supposed to be room for a certain type of gesture that is irreducible to both, the gesture of nature' (1986: 12, my translation). This three-way distinction may again be traced to Aristotle. Rosset usefully sums up the latter's conceptions as follows: nature is spontaneous and teleological, artifice is teleological and non-spontaneous, chance is spontaneous and non-teleological (1986: 240). In Lévi-Strauss's vocabulary, chance is the 'event', whose integration into man-made structures is perceived as a fundamental human need. (I do not have the space here for a detailed discussion of the place of the concept of chance in Lévi-Strauss's thought, although it constitutes an important principle or rather counter-principle.¹⁵) In contrast to these views, Rosset argues for a 'tragic' view of the world which accepts the ultimately random nature of all causal chains. Everything, in the end, is chance, i.e. chaos, although we may sometimes be deluded into thinking that the patterns we observe are meaningful or willed or the result of some kind of teleology. However much we feel that our actions have effects in the world, that we can cause things to happen, these actions and their consequences are ultimately lost in broader schemes that no one has premeditated and that no principle guides.

It will now have become apparent that in trying to understand the mytho-poetic function one needs to complexify one's understanding not only of the domains that it delimits but also of the nature of the act of delimitation. The borderline-drawing process cannot be viewed simply as a process of separation or differentiation. The act of tracing a border interconnects the domains separated by that border, puts them in a relationship

¹⁵ As Lévi-Strauss points out in *The Savage Mind* (1966b: 16; 1962b: 30), the word *bricolage* was used in Old French in the context of games such as billiards to denote the accidental movement of the bouncing ball, a movement that the billiards player seeks to master. The spectacle afforded by all games, including sports, is arguably that of the mastering of chance, which in turn explains the reaction of the players and the public when chance interferes in a game, for example in tennis, when a key point is won as a result of the ball bouncing off the net.

with one another. The mytho-poetic function, construed as a borderline-tracing function, is meaningful in as much as it demonstrates the mutual implication, the interdependency and compenetration of different domains of events. Art is fundamentally about establishing limits between different worlds (this is concretised in painting by the frame, but one may see something similar in ritual, which creates its own space apart from daily life, a sacred space) but also about showing how each of these worlds (fiction and non-fiction, the sacred and the profane, the world of the living and the world of the dead) inhabits the other.¹⁶

The final object that I would like to consider in this chapter, Arman's *Artériosclérose* (1961), may be viewed as a meditation on the interrelations between chance, human action and natural processes, and of the kinds of causal relations associated with each. *Artériosclérose* is a glass case containing several hundred identical forks and spoons. As an artefact it is the product of human action (the artist's). However, like Duchamp's readymades, it reduces the domain of human intervention to the narrowest possible margin. The artist has not so much 'made' the work as made it possible. His role has consisted in emptying dozens of forks and spoons into a case. This jumble of objects presents the image of a randomly piled up collection of items, the very antithesis of a work of art construed as a meditated composition. *Artériosclérose* is something like a box for preserving a record of a random event.¹⁷ The true author of the work of art is chance itself. But this work invites other levels of reading. Although the way in which the spoons and forks have fallen into the case appears to have been random, after a more prolonged observation of the work, these start to form complex patterns; indeed they appear to have been arranged so as to form a composition. This is no doubt in part a by-product of the processes of semiotic fission already described above in connection with Duchamp's readymades, whereby objects are viewed, as it were, in and for themselves, divested of any meaning derived from their function.

¹⁶ Ethno-aesthetics would seem to be particularly well suited to the development of a general theory of frontiers. Issues about territorial and cultural borders, as well as the division of cultural spaces (sacred/profane; public/private; male/female, etc.) are paralleled, in aesthetics, by issues about the limits between representation and reality, image and world, fiction and non-fiction. Each of these cases raises questions about the mechanisms whereby frontiers are determined, why they are placed, where they are placed, and what their broader purpose is. Anthropology, here, has a lot to offer to aesthetics, and aesthetics to anthropology.

¹⁷ It recalls Duchamp's 'Three Standard Stoppages' (1913–14) also referred to sometimes as 'Tinned Chance'. Duchamp dropped three one metre long threads onto cloth, fastened them to it without altering their position and then cut the cloth into strips which he stuck onto glass plates which he finally transferred to a wooden box.

(Semiotic fission is the visual equivalent of what sometimes happens when a word is repeated over and over again. The repetition divests the word of its semantic value. As a result, it is apprehended for what it is at heart, a unique sound pattern.) The forks and spoons, by this process, are reduced to abstract shapes, and the way in which these shapes are repeated in the case, the way in which clusters create a sense of movement, generates something like an internal rhythm. The piece is not without recollecting, in this respect, Pollock's action paintings. What at first appears to be the product of chance, upon closer inspection is revealed to contain an order – not unlike nature itself, although there seems little room for nature in this assemblage of glass and metal. The result is that we are drawn into the space of the box, as we are into the composed space of the classical painted image. Arman's box creates an illusory space that we can, in a sense, 'enter', in the manner of the perspectival space of a painting. What do we learn once we have 'entered' this image?

What is striking about Arman's box of forks and spoons is that it does not quite fit any of the Aristotelian categories outlined by Rosset and listed above. It presents the paradoxical image of a form of artifice that is spontaneous (the creative act is assimilated to a chance occurrence) and a form of chance that is teleological (the box contains an order). The viewer, here, is put in a position similar to that of the seer, carrying out acts of divination by interpreting patterns spontaneously produced by nature (the flights of birds, the way in which twigs fall), patterns that one is invited to assign to a cause beyond pure chance. In this connection, *Artériosclérose* is not without certain spiritualist connotations.

One final feature of Arman's *Artériosclérose* needs to be considered in the context of this discussion. A third causal sequence is unfolding in the box: a number of the forks and spoons have started to rust. This process subjects Arman's creation to an independent temporal cycle that negates the temporal cycle of the creative act. It will eventually reduce the contents of the case to a pile of dust, perhaps a metaphor for the disease evoked by the title of the work. Here, it is entropy, the very opposite of nature construed as a developmental principle inherent in all things, that has the final word. The opposition with which this particular work of art grapples mytho-poetically is none other than that which provided Hamlet with his most famous soliloquy, that between being and non-being.

One question raised by the developments that precede is why the mytho-poetic function seems to manifest itself, in a privileged way, specifically in avant-garde art? In many ways, the story of the development of avant-garde art has been that of the undoing of the mimetic project. In the modern

era, the meaning of the work of art can no longer be assimilated to a *content*. The work of art starts to signify by virtue of the relationships it establishes with what lies 'outside' of the work of art: other works of art (intertextuality), the gallery space, the viewer (Archer 2002: 74). Robert Morris's *Untitled* (1965) is made up of four mirrored cubes which reflect in fragmented form the viewers circulating around them. It works in a manner not all that dissimilar to split representation when it is used to depict an animal on the four sides of a box. Here, however, it is the viewer that is dislocated by the mirrors and, as it were, introjected by the work of art. Eva Hesse's *Hang Up* (1966) is a bandaged frame, reminiscent of the frame of a painting, with a length of metal rod protruding from it, which makes it impossible for the viewer to decide whether he or she is in a space inside or outside of the work of art, in the 'natural' world or an 'artificial' one. 'Where is the borderline?' Land-art took this logic to another level, by directly inscribing the landscape, in a similar way that Caduveo body paintings inscribe the body, transforming *it* into a work of art. One possible way of answering the above question about the privileged relationship between avant-garde art and the mytho-poetic function is that as the meaning of an artwork is displaced away from the object's semantic content (it becomes problematic to locate the meaning of the object 'inside' the object) its mytho-poetic function comes to the fore (it is worth spelling out that this is not a connection that Lévi-Strauss makes or is likely to endorse). The definition of a 'primitive' myth that Lévi-Strauss gives in his conversations with Didier Eribon fits avant-garde art very well. A 'primitive' myth, he explains: 'offers us a grid that is definable only by its rules of construction. This grid makes it possible to decipher a meaning, not of the myth itself but of all the rest – images of the world, of society, of history, that hover on the threshold of consciousness, with the questions men ask about them' (1991b: 142; 1988a: 197). The contemporary art that I have evoked so far also offers a 'grid of intelligibility', which gives meaning to the world (the 'context' in which it appears) as opposed to the object itself.

PAINTING, MYTH, MUSIC

The next two chapters will deal extensively with the aesthetic implications of the *Mythologiques* as a whole. It is in this text, written over a period of nearly ten years, that the aesthetic and anthropological strands of Lévi-Strauss's thought most closely come together. I would like to focus here, by way of a conclusion to this chapter, on the 'Overture' with which this four-volume series begins, a text that George Steiner compares in complexity to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. As well as introducing the anthropological

aims and methods of the *Mythologiques* it contains one of Lévi-Strauss's fullest and most complex aesthetic statements, and as such warrants particular interest. It also manifests, most openly, Lévi-Strauss's desire to put in place broad, overarching systems of explanation and it is precisely around the nature/culture dichotomy that he does so. The aesthetic part of this introductory text may be seen, in this connection, as an elaboration and complexification of the general aesthetic proposition put forward in the *Entretiens*: that art is a 'prise de possession' of nature by culture. Here, as will become apparent, the nature/culture dichotomy designates once again a fundamental ontological distinction, credited with objective validity, in Lévi-Strauss's own system of thought.

What Lévi-Strauss attempts to articulate in the second part of the 'Overture' is a theory of the interrelation between the arts, although not all art forms are considered (sculpture, in particular, is all but left out). Such theories have formed an important part of modern aesthetic thought, Hegel having formulated the most comprehensive and philosophically systematic theory of art forms, mapping them on to historical periods. Although Lévi-Strauss does not engage explicitly with any previous attempts to theorise the correspondences between the arts, he does try to answer, in structuralist terms, some key questions that have been at the heart of such systems. Lessing's *Laocoön* is generally considered to mark an important turning point in the understanding of the relation between the arts in as much as it overturned the Renaissance assumption of the unity of the arts summed up in Horace's often quoted formula: *ut pictura poesis* (as is painting, so is poetry). Lessing's essay on the classical sculpture evoked by Pliny but lost until 1506 when it was rediscovered (it depicts the smothering of Laocoön and his sons by two monstrous snakes), emphasised, on the contrary, how each form of art expresses itself according to laws specific to it. He thereby opened the way for a meditation on the specificity of the modes of expression particular to each form of art, a meditation which Lévi-Strauss's 'Overture' continues.

The gist of Lévi-Strauss's classification of art forms is to establish the close affinity that exists between myth and music and to contrast these art forms with others such as painting. Myth and music on one side, painting and sculpture on the other. And the means of this division – essentially an elaboration of Lessing's own distinction between temporal and spatial art forms – is a blend of linguistic theory and anthropology as seen in the light of the special logic of chiasmic inversion (an inverted symmetry that has the form ABBA).

All art forms, for Lévi-Strauss, may be seen as kinds of languages, which for him means that, like natural languages which combine phonemes

(devoid of any inherent semantic value) into higher-order structures such as morphemes (the smallest unit of meaning in language), they articulate two systems. They possess primary-level units, the equivalent of phonemes, which are integrated into higher-order structures. This is known as 'duality of patterning'. In the case of music, for example, the primary-level units are the notes of the scale; or rather, more precisely, music's 'primary level of articulation' (equivalent to the phonological system of a natural language) is made up of the hierarchical relationships that exist between those notes (which varies according to the scale considered) and enables such differentiations as that between fundamental, tonic and dominant notes. In the case of myths, the primary-level units are the series of events, real or imagined, that will make up the plot. For painting, it is colour and shape.

It is here that chiasmus comes into play. For what distinguishes, according to Lévi-Strauss, music (and myth) from painting, is that painting derives its primary-level units from nature, whereas the primary-level units used by music are cultural artefacts. Musical scales – which are different for different cultures – are cultural artefacts, as indeed are the musical instruments that are necessary to create music. The result is the symmetrical but inverse relationship that each kind of art form has with nature. In Lévi-Strauss's own words:

painting, through the instrumentality of culture, gives intellectual organization to a form of nature which it was already aware of as a sense of pattern. Music follows exactly the opposite course: culture is already present in it, but in the form of sense experience, even before it organizes it intellectually by means of nature. (1970: 22; 1964a: 30)

Music is a cultural invention (it is pure artifice), but is given body (brought into existence) as nature (sensible reality). Music is not sound, it *becomes* sound. Conversely, nature (sensible reality) is a given for painting, whose task is to use cultural codes (style) to reorganise it (transform it into an artefact). To sum up the chiasmic structure of the argument: music is 'naturalised' culture whereas painting is 'culturalised' nature.

Lévi-Strauss further develops this classificatory system to include two minor art forms: Chinese calligraphic art and so-called 'concrete' music. The effect is to add a further chiasmic reversal to the original system. For, according to Lévi-Strauss's schema, Chinese calligraphic art should not be seen as a kind of painting, as one might think, but rather comes into the same category as music, because, as with music, the primary-level units with which it creates – i.e. the system of ideograms – is a product of culture not nature. Conversely, concrete music, which rejects the musical scale created by culture and attempts to compose using elements of sound

found in nature, i.e. noise, is in a formally similar situation to painting since, like painting, it creates its primary level of articulation out of natural elements. More precisely, it is like abstract painting, for having extracted sounds from 'nature', it distorts them so that they cannot be identified. The end result is that what is normally seen as a form of painting is attached to the category of music, and what is normally seen as music, to the category of painting. In the 'Overture', Lévi-Strauss uses chiasmic logic, linguistic theory and the nature/culture dichotomy as a means of establishing a typology, of formalising (and systematising) the relationships between different objects, in particular objects that appear to be quite different, such as music and painting (I will return to this point below).

As with earlier attempts to theorise the interrelation between different art forms, Lévi-Strauss's system serves to justify an aesthetic hierarchy, in this case one that places music at the top. The intelligibility of music is, in Lévi-Strauss's words, 'the supreme mystery of the science of man, a mystery that all the various disciplines come up against and which holds the key to their progress' (1970: 18; 1964a: 26). By contrast, the 'natural' origin of painting's primary level of articulation is put forward as further justification for its inability to free itself from representation. We are naturally conditioned, Lévi-Strauss argues, to assign colours and noises to a cause and therefore always ask of them: 'what do they represent?' (1970: 19; 1964a: 27). Whereas, as Borges (1999: 397) puts it, paraphrasing Schopenhauer, music has no need of the world to exist.

Contrary to what some critics of structuralism have hastily surmised, Lévi-Strauss does not assimilate art to language. His system of correspondences between art forms is indeed concerned with what art owes to language and in this respect answers a question raised in *Structural Anthropology*, a question that serves as one of the guiding threads of structuralism as a whole: 'the question may be raised whether the different aspects of social life (including even art and religion) . . . do not constitute phenomena whose inmost nature is the same as that of language' (1963a: 62; 1958: 71).¹⁸ But in his analysis of this relationship (analogy), what concerns Lévi-Strauss is first and foremost the specificity of art as a language – i.e. how art *differs* from spoken languages – and, indeed, how each art form, considered in its relations to the others, is distinct.

¹⁸ For a musicologist's exploration of the value of applying linguistic theory to the analysis of music, see: Deliège 1965: 45–52. This article surveys the ideas of a number of musicologists from the early twentieth century, whom Deliège characterises as 'pre-structuralist'.

What differentiates art as a whole from natural languages, according to Lévi-Strauss, is that, as he puts it: 'As far as . . . speech is concerned, the coming into operation of the second code wipes out the originality of the first' (1970: 20; 1964a: 28). When language is being used for non-aesthetic means, its material basis, the system of sounds that makes up its primary level of articulation, becomes 'transparent'. The sounds that make up words are merely diacritical units, means to an end without any inherent 'value'. This is reversed in the case of poetry, which reinvests language's primary level of articulation – the phonic texture of the poem – with meaning, thus restoring the 'originality' of both levels of articulation. Here again, Lévi-Strauss's aesthetic system is the means of justifying his aesthetic values. For it is precisely because both abstract art and concrete music allegedly obliterate their primary levels of articulation that they fail as aesthetic languages and succumb to what Lévi-Strauss describes as the 'utopian ideal of the day', namely, 'to construct a system of signs on a single level of articulation' (1970: 24; 1964a: 32). On the contrary, with music, myth and painting, the interplay of the two systems that form their two levels of articulation is such that their messages are received simultaneously by 'aesthetic perception' – i.e. the senses – and 'intellectual perception', i.e. the mind, this simultaneous decoding being one of the marks of the aesthetic experience, as described in the 'Overture'. There is indeed, here, a valuable lesson to be learnt about the nature of aesthetic perception. It may be characterised in terms of a certain state of equilibrium between form and content that is such that the content ('message') can only be reached at the end of something like a journey through form. The sensible dimensions of the work of art do not disappear behind the 'message' but offer a resistance. The 'message' is apprehended at the same time as the means by which it has been conveyed. There is, in this connection, a reflexive dimension to the aesthetic experience. 'Messages' are only ever understood as part of the process of deciphering *how* these messages have been given body as sensible forms. This is what I take Lévi-Strauss to mean when he writes that art may only be considered an authentic 'language' (i.e. attain intelligibility) if it 'results from the contrapuntal relation between two levels of articulation' (1970: 21; 1964a: 29).

One further feature of Lévi-Strauss's theory of the interrelation between art forms needs to be considered here. It provides the elements of an answer to a number of questions that are central to the ontology of art, among them whether a work of art is a physical object and, in the case of art that is performed, whether the work can be identified with a performance of it?

Like Benedetto Croce, Lévi-Strauss sees works of art as mental entities, indeed even 'unconscious' entities.

One corollary of Lévi-Strauss's application to aesthetics of the theory of duality of patterning is the promotion of the consumer of the work of art to the status of what one might call a co-producer of that work. The first task of musical composition, according to Lévi-Strauss, is to extract from the sound continuum a system of intervals, in other words, the notes of a musical scale. Similarly, the first task of mythical thought is to extract from the sum-total of known or imagined historical events those it will use to construct a story. As we have seen, these processes provide the primary-level units – found in or made by culture – with which myth and music create. These primary-level units are then combined, at another level, to form narrative sequences or musical patterns, in the way that phonemes are combined to form words and sentences. The key point here is that the process whereby lower-level units are integrated, at a secondary level of articulation, to form meaningful structures, is an 'internal' (1970: 16; 1964a: 24), even 'unconscious' one. The second level of articulation comes into existence only in and through the 'listener'. Furthermore, the second 'continuum' (1970: 16; 1964a: 24), at the level of which primary level units are invested with meaning, has its roots, says Lévi-Strauss, in the listener's own psychological and physiological sense of time: 'music exploits organic rhythms and ... gives relevance to [discontinuities] that would otherwise remain latent and submerged, as it were, in [the temporal continuum]' (1970: 16; 1964a: 24).¹⁹ Lévi-Strauss's conceptions, here, recall his theory of Caduveo body painting. Musical and mythical audition also consists in something like a writing on the body – indeed, here, inside the body – whereby it is transformed. The composer's manipulation of musical intervals is played out on an inner keyboard, thus modifying our 'inner' sense of time. It is worth quoting here Lévi-Strauss's evocative description of the experience of listening to music, which brings out very well the listener's necessary involvement in the 'performance' of the piece (the description could be applied word for word to writing and describes very well Lévi-Strauss's own style, in particular his use of syntax in the long sentences for which he has a predilection):

The musical emotion springs precisely from the fact that at each moment the composer withholds or adds more or less than the listener anticipates on the basis

¹⁹ I have amended the translation. The French term used by Lévi-Strauss that I have translated as 'the temporal continuum' is 'la durée'. Bergson differentiated mathematical time (counted by the hands of a clock) and subjective time ('durée').

of a pattern that he thinks he can guess, but that he is incapable of wholly divining because of his subjection to a dual periodicity: that of his respiratory system, which is determined by his individual nature, and that of the scale, which is determined by his training. If the composer withholds more than we anticipate, we experience a delicious falling sensation; we feel we have been torn from a stable point on the musical ladder and thrust into the void, but only because the support that is waiting for us was not in the expected place. When the composer withholds less, the opposite occurs: he forces us to perform gymnastic exercises more skilful than our own. Sometimes he moves us, sometimes he forces us to make the movement ourselves, but it always exceeds what we would have thought ourselves capable of achieving alone. Aesthetic enjoyment is made up of this multiplicity of excitements and moments of respite, of expectations disappointed or fulfilled beyond anticipation – a multiplicity resulting from the challenges made by the work and from the contradictory feeling it arouses that the tests it is subjecting us to are impossible, at the same time as it prepares to provide us with the marvellously unpredictable means of coping with them. (1970: 17; 1964a: 25)

The result is, as Lévi-Strauss puts it, a reversal in the relationship between the ‘emitter’ and the ‘receiver’ of the message transmitted by music and myth: ‘the latter discovers its own meaning through the message from the former: music has its being in me, and I listen to myself through it. Thus the myth and the musical work are like conductors of an orchestra, whose audience becomes the silent performers’ (1970: 17; 1964a: 25). With music and myth – and indeed art in general – the process of articulating primary-level units into higher-level structures – the condition of art’s intelligibility – throws a bridge between nature and culture, or in Lévi-Strauss’s words enables their ‘mediation’. Here too, the position Lévi-Strauss assigns to music is exceptional. Like myth and painting, music articulates two continuums, one belonging to nature, the other to culture. But unlike these art forms, in the case of music these continuums are, as it were, ‘enhanced’ (*‘dédoublé’*) (1970: 27; 1964a: 36), says Lévi-Strauss: on the side of culture, because the hierarchical relationships between sounds refer the listener to a more fundamental discontinuity between musical sound and noise; on the side of nature, because the ‘inner’ temporal continuum (*‘grid’*), associated with our psychological sense of time, is connected to an even deeper sense of time – ‘still more wholly natural’ (1970: 27; 1964a: 36) – which is not cerebral but ‘visceral’, one that is related to cardio-vascular rhythms and breathing. Lévi-Strauss’s conclusion:

in music the mediation between nature and culture that occurs within every language becomes a hypermediation; the connections are strengthened on either side. Since music is established at the point where two different spheres overlap, its writ runs well beyond boundaries that the other arts are careful not to overstep. In the two

opposite directions of nature and culture, it is able to go much farther than they can. This explains the principle . . . of music's extraordinary power to act simultaneously on the mind and the senses, stimulating both ideas and emotions and blending them in a common flow, so that they cease to exist side by side, except insofar as they correspond to, and bear witness to, each other. (1970: 27–8; 1964a: 36)

In constructing his theory of the interrelation between myth, music and painting, Lévi-Strauss is at times straining to maintain an ontological difference that in other parts of his works, as we have seen, he has put into question. This is the case, for example, when he tries to argue that the song of birds does not constitute an example of natural music. Since birds use their song for 'communication', he argues, it may be said to belong, if not exactly 'in' culture, at least 'on the frontiers of language' (1970: 19; 1964a: 27). Similarly, the ambiguous status of the human voice – is it part of culture or nature? – as an 'instrument' used 'artificially' to produce music (in the manner of musical instruments) points towards the problematic nature of a distinction taken here as objective.

The above theory of the interrelation between the arts, however, reveals a way of thinking that is as distinctive of Lévi-Strauss as a fingerprint. Indeed, he treats the different kinds of art forms in the same way as he does Amerindian myths, as so many states of a single transformational group. The structuralist enterprise is quintessentially about systematising heterogeneous data, thereby mapping out an organised field. The structuralist imagination is topographic. This field, however, is not static but made up of a system of modifiable relations, so that it is possible to get from one element in the field to another by the application of a transformational rule, such as the inversion of the respective positions assigned to nature and culture in the constitution of music and painting's primary levels of articulation. The field is open to the introduction of new elements, which entails its reordering. One can see in this scheme a further mark of Lévi-Strauss's Kantianism, here in the form of an attempt to grasp *a priori* conditions of different kinds of aesthetic experiences.

From myth to music

In the preceding chapters, I have shown that although Lévi-Strauss's aesthetic reflections may appear to belong to digressions, to the margins of his anthropological work, in reality they often continue to preoccupy Lévi-Strauss even when this is not manifest at the surface of what he writes. They provide a hidden connecting thread to the various questions that are at the core of structuralism. The very concept of structure was in part inspired by Lévi-Strauss's contemplation of a dandelion. The event is said to have taken place in 1940 when, as a young soldier, he was posted on the Luxemburg border. That a concept seemingly as technical as that of structure should be linked to this moment of symbiosis with nature is symptomatic of the way in which Lévi-Strauss's writings intertwine multiple and seemingly divergent sources of inspiration (I have discussed the naturalist derivation of the notion of transformation in chapter 5).

In this chapter and the next, I will focus on Lévi-Strauss's writings on Amerindian myths, in particular the four-volume series of the *Mythologiques* (1970, 1973b, 1978c, 1981; 1964a, 1966a, 1968, 1971a). In this work, Lévi-Strauss formulates one of the key twentieth-century theories of 'primitive' myth, providing new hypotheses about the nature of mythical discourse, the processes of creation behind it, and its place and function in human society. The new ideas that he has proposed, which I will outline below, have had a profound impact on anthropology and contemporary thought in general. Yet, in many ways, they remain misunderstood. In particular, the complexity of the *Mythologiques* as a text – it defies generic classification – has not been sufficiently recognised. It is perhaps best described as the meeting place between two discourses: the distant and unfamiliar discourse of Amerindian myth, oral and anonymous, and the logocentric discourse of the analyst and its attendant systems of knowledge (mathematical, rhetorical, musical, etc.). This explains the hybrid title that Lévi-Strauss gave to this series and his conception of this text as an authorless text (see the 'Finale'). The *Mythologiques* are not an attempt to pin

down the meaning of myths; the different discourses that come together and merge here do so, as it were, of their own accord, without one discourse seeking to master the other. It is perhaps here, too, that music enters into this work. One of the places where these different discourses meet is the place of music (I will return to this at the end of the chapter). This in part explains why Lévi-Strauss is able to write that one cannot penetrate Amerindian mythology without being changed by it. The process of analytical dissolution works in both directions, to become a dissolution of the self; subject and object constantly switch positions.

In this chapter and the next, I will explore some of the ways in which one may read this overdetermined text, focusing on the interrelation between three levels of reading: anthropological, aesthetic and mythopoetic (I will focus on the last level of reading in the next chapter). Most anthropologists who have written about mythology have tended to be interested in the social function of 'primitive' myths or they have treated myths as a source of information about religious beliefs or ritual practices. For Bronislaw Malinowski, for example, myths are charters that legitimise certain kinds of social contracts. Lévi-Strauss is different in that, while approaching myths from an anthropological perspective, he does not lose sight of the fact that they are also aesthetic objects and that their study therefore raises aesthetic questions. Lévi-Strauss makes a revealing comment in a little-known interview with Raymond Bellour that he gave shortly after the publication of the first volume of the *Mythologiques*. It shows how deeply anthropological and aesthetic concerns are imbricated in this work: 'My curiosity about myths is born from a deep feeling whose nature, at the moment, I am unable to penetrate. What is a beautiful object? What is aesthetic emotion? Maybe that is what I am trying to understand through my study of myths, without being clearly aware of the fact' (Lévi-Strauss 1967b: 7, my translation). Beyond the anthropological enterprise, Lévi-Strauss is thus trying to grasp, *through* myths, something of the nature of aesthetic objects in general and, by extension, of the emotion to which they give rise. It is as if myths reflected for the mythographer the image of a beautiful object and therefore provided a privileged route of access to an understanding of such objects – or, at least, such is Lévi-Strauss's *hope*. To understand the *Mythologiques* properly we must therefore read it not only as an anthropological study of a corpus of 'primitive' myths, but also as a treatise on aesthetics. As I will try to show in the next chapter, beyond this aesthetic reading, the *Mythologiques* is yet something else, an aesthetic creation in its own right, Lévi-Strauss's own mytho-poem.

Lévi-Strauss's work on Amerindian myths started in the fifties at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes. During the time that he wrote the *Mythologiques*, whose four volumes were published between 1964 and 1971, he devoted himself more or less to nothing else. In the Eribon interviews, he describes himself as drunk on myths from dawn to dusk. His reasons for turning away, relatively speaking, from the study of concrete social structures (e.g. kinship or classificatory systems) to focus more closely on myth were multiple and complex. They were in part motivated by a desire to concentrate more closely on the question of the functioning of the mind, i.e. psychology. But this shift in focus also allowed Lévi-Strauss to marry his anthropological and aesthetic concerns in a much closer way than his earlier research projects. In many ways, his whole approach to myth called for an aesthetics, made it necessary for his anthropology to go via aesthetics. This is made apparent, for example, in his characterisation of mythical discourse, in the 'Overture' to the *Mythologiques*, as a kind of analogon to music. What interests Lévi-Strauss above all in his studies of myths is how a culture generates and transmits its myths. Lévi-Strauss is concerned not with what myths *do* for society, but with how they come into being. Myths matter to him not because of what they tell us about the functioning of social institutions or relations, but because of what they tell us about the functioning of the minds that invented them. In short, what Lévi-Strauss develops in the *Mythologiques* is a theory of creation.

The *Mythologiques* pursue the anthropological project started with the study of kinship systems: to reduce the disorder of empirically observed social reality to an underlying rational order, an order which is ultimately traceable to the patterning action of the mind. It is the nature of this patterning action that fundamentally interests Lévi-Strauss. As he puts it: 'Starting from ethnographic experience, I have always aimed at drawing up an inventory of mental patterns, to reduce apparently arbitrary data to some kind of order, and to attain a level at which a kind of necessity becomes apparent, underlying the illusions of liberty' (1970: 10; 1964a: 18). However, there is a key difference between Lévi-Strauss's work on kinship and classificatory systems and his work on myth which explains the latter's greater proximity to aesthetics. In Lévi-Strauss's earlier work on kinship the possibility existed that the recurring structures that he unravelled did not reflect the functioning of the mind but rather that of external constraints, of an economic or social kind, that had become objectified in the institutions of kinship exchanges. In other words, nothing guaranteed that the elementary structures that he identified, and formalised with the help of the mathematician A. Weil, arose out of a set of *internal* determinants. The

situation of mythical thought is different because myth, according to Lévi-Strauss, is disengaged from any immediate practical function (the opposite of Malinowski's functionalist view of myth). Its hidden structures cannot therefore derive from material (e.g. socio-economic) constraints outside of the myths themselves. In mythical invention the mind attains a certain autonomy: it is left free to follow spontaneously its own creative logic (in Kantian terms, it is 'disinterested'). Therefore, Lévi-Strauss argues, if one can show that this creative flow is determined by rules, that the genesis of myths conforms to certain structural patterns, one may assume that these rules and patterns derive from the mind itself. In mythology, the mind, cut off from any purposive function, and from the need to represent the external world of objects (a myth is not an imitation of reality), finds itself constrained, says Lévi-Strauss, to imitate or represent *itself* as an object. Myths, construed as manifestations of the free functioning of the mind, reflect the mind's innate modes of operating, although other determinants (historical, geographical, socio-economic, etc.) also shape the direction of mythical thought but, as it were, from the outside, in the way that objects in the path of a river alter its flow (1981: 628–9; 1971a: 562).

Lévi-Strauss's project in the *Mythologiques* is best understood as a variant of what Valéry understood by 'poïetics' (from the Greek *poiein*: 'to make'), namely the analysis of the mind engaged in the creative act. The value of the anthropological work of translating symbolic systems produced by cultures that are 'other' into familiar terms lies in the fact that it reveals mental structures common to both – 'a pattern of basic and universal laws' (1970: 11; 1964a: 19). This process of cultural 'translation' that is anthropology, this 'gymnastic', is presented as the means of constructing an *anatomy of thought*. Similarly, Valéry writes: 'What I think is much less *my thought* than the act of a faculty of thinking which, for the moment, is being exercised on one point rather than another. The act strikes me much more than its product' (Valéry 2000a: 218). Lévi-Strauss's ambition, like Valéry's, is to lay bare – like the mechanism of a clock – the mechanisms of the mind engaged in creative processes, its internal structures and the rules that govern its operations. Lévi-Strauss compares the mythographer to a street vendor who dismantles the objects that he sells to show how they work (1963a: 213; 1958: 235). However, unlike Valéry, who mainly studied his own act of poetic invention, Lévi-Strauss does not take his own mind as an object. The 'act of thought' is grasped in the relationship between self and other. Let us look more closely at this 'act of thought'.

The myth numbered M7 (*The Raw and the Cooked*), told by the southern-hemisphere Gé Indians, tells the story of Botoque who is taken by his elder

brother-in-law to catch the young of a pair of macaws nesting on top of a steep rock. Botoque is made to climb a makeshift ladder, but having arrived at the height of the nest all he can find in it are two eggs. His brother-in-law asks for them. Botoque throws them down, but as they fall the eggs transform into stones which cut his elder brother's hands as he tries to catch them. Enraged, the latter removes the ladder and abandons Botoque. For several days Botoque is stranded at the top of the rock. He is hungry and thirsty, and as he is becoming thinner he is forced to eat his own excrement. At last, he sees below him a spotted jaguar carrying a bow and arrow and all kinds of game. He wants to cry out for help, but fear of the jaguar renders him mute. The jaguar notices the shadow of Botoque on the ground. He tries, in vain, to catch it, then looks up, inquires after Botoque, replaces the ladder against the rock and invites the young boy down.

If one is to compare M7 to the other versions of this myth one notices that a series of transformations have occurred. In M12, Botoque climbs the ladder to the nest of macaws but then lies to his brother-in-law, telling him that the nest is empty. The brother-in-law becomes impatient, so Botoque throws a stone at him (taken from his mouth, not the nest). And this stone transforms into an egg as it falls to the ground. In M7 and M8, Botoque, trapped on his rock, is forced to eat his own excrement; in M9, M10 and M11, Botoque is covered in the excrement of birds hovering around the nest. In M8, the jaguar climbs the ladder to help Botoque down; in the other versions he welcomes him at the foot of the ladder; in M9, M10, M11 and M12 the jaguar is given the macaws in exchange for his help, but in M7 and M8 he is not.

For Lévi-Strauss, myths do not have any meaning in themselves but only in relation to each other and therefore have to be studied in the course of their transformation from one into another in order to unlock their meanings. To illustrate how Lévi-Strauss applies his method of myth-analysis is always problematic because wherever one starts one is always breaking into a chain, or even several chains of transformations. Equally, wherever one stops will always fall short of arriving at a final interpretation, since it is in the nature of myths always to be in the process of becoming other myths, none of which contains the final meaning. The paths of transformation that Lévi-Strauss follows form intricate patterns; it is not simply a question of one myth transforming into another in a unilinear progression. Myths are organised into groups which are made up of series of myths in a relationship of transformation. But each myth from a series also contains motifs that are transformations of motifs present in myths belonging to other groups or series. The overall picture that emerges is of multidimensional

networks of bisecting axes of transformation, an endless criss-crossing of stories. What Lévi-Strauss sees in this ever-changing microcosm, I would suggest, is a model of one of the ways in which art forms have been created through time and history. The basic hypothesis underlying the *Mythologiques* is that myths come into being by a process of transformation of one myth into another and that these transformations – which are carried out according to a small number of recurring formal rules – are the product of the combinatorial functioning of the unconscious mind. Each myth is the result of a kaleidoscopic style rearrangement of elements, of a series of logical substitutions and permutations of elementary units that Lévi-Strauss sees as one of the mainsprings not only of mythical creation but of aesthetic creation in general. Lévi-Strauss's analysis of the functioning of this combinatorial logic, of what drives and determines it, as I will try to show, is one of his distinctive contributions to an understanding of the creative process.

In a number of texts written after the *Mythologiques*, which I will examine below, he shows that this logic is at work in forms of creation other than 'primitive' myths: first, in the transformation of Northwest Coast masks, then in the creation of literary and operatic myths, with the transformations, for example, of the Perceval legend from the early versions of Chrétien de Troyes and Wolfram von Eschenbach to Wagner's opera, *Parsifal*; then in classical Western painting, in his study of the genesis of one of Poussin's best-known works, the *Arcadian Shepherds*. In a certain sense you could say that myth is art in its uncooked state: the thing in itself, in raw form. By collecting hundreds of myths and subjecting them to analysis, Lévi-Strauss was able to discover the repeating patterns and schemas that these myths followed, and from this he was able to take the next step and say that these patterns and schemas must reflect, in encoded form, the way human beings generally think, understand and especially create. Myths are not worked out stories – that comes later, out of the ruins of myths. But in their raw state myths expose the underlying armature of the work of art; they reveal the schemas that lie beneath the surface of the beautiful object. To lay bare these schemas we must first look at some of the Amerindian myths that Lévi-Strauss gathered and analysed.

MYTHICAL THINKING

A myth, in Lévi-Strauss's theory, is a logical tool that is used by social groups to 'solve' – symbolically, at least – many different kinds of

problems. In Amerindian myths the problems to be solved are always *local* problems and relate to many different aspects of life: institutional, religious, moral, metaphysical and so on. Often, but not always, the problem that a myth tries to solve takes the form of a logical contradiction that is concealed in a group's systems of belief and that the myth tries either to overcome or simply to conceal. In the case of the Oedipus myth, for example, the contradiction, inherent in Greek culture, is between the propositions, on the one hand, that human beings are born from the earth, and on the other, that they are the outcome of the intercourse between two individuals (Cadmus, the brother of Europa, created an army of men by sowing the teeth of a dragon). Many mythological systems explain problems with walking as an after-effect of man's chthonic birth. And the names of the members of the male lineage of the Oedipus family all appear to evoke an inability to walk straight (Oedipus = 'swollen foot', Laius = 'left-sided', Labdacus = 'lame') so Lévi-Strauss relates the problems with walking to being born from within the earth. But the belief in the chthonic origins of man is clearly incompatible with what the Greeks knew about the physiological fact of procreation. The Oedipus myth attempts to mediate – to solve – that contradiction. 'The Oedipus myth', Lévi-Strauss writes, 'provides a . . . logical tool which relates the original problem – born from one or born from two? – to the derivative problem: born from different or born from same?' (1963a: 216; 1958: 239).

According to Lévi-Strauss, problem-solving is one of the motors that sets mythical thought in motion. It is what provides the creative impetus ('l'élan créateur') that brings about a myth. It is also a source of artistic endeavour. Here the problem can be concerned with human conflict but also with questions of colour, shape, melody, dissonance, the defining condition being opposition.

Lévi-Strauss says that myths, like orbiting planets, are drawn to a particular problem by its specific mass (*The Naked Man*, 1981: 628–9; 1971a: 562). Spurred on by the need to find a way of dealing with some problem of opposition (or contradiction, or paradox), a series of transformations is set in motion, each new version of a myth constituting a new response to the problem at hand or to other cognate problems. Myths, however, do not 'solve' the problems around which they revolve. Like poetry or literature, they find metaphorical equivalents for them. Their principal virtue is to transpose one problem into the terms of a formally similar one in another domain. Which is why Lévi-Strauss says that myths develop 'in a spiral'. They are engaged in a never-ending and never-to-be-resolved dialogical whirl. Falling short of providing a definitive solution to

the problems that they deal with, myths content themselves with linking these problems up and showing that they can be seen as analogous to one another. In this way, a myth may be seen as a chain of extended metaphors, which is essentially what Lévi-Strauss means when he says that they are made up of a series of superimposed 'codes': a 'code' is something like an implicit extended metaphor.

If myths provide a form of intellectual satisfaction it is not through resolution, but because they enable the systematisation of a set of seemingly disparate concepts. Like art defined in terms of the 'modèle réduit' analogy, they enable human beings to see the world as a complex whole whose many parts (and problems) are all interrelated – in 'correspondence' with one another.

Myths do not contain a preconceived transmitted message which they supposedly encode, they are not the result of the conversion of some pre-existing content (a body of ideas) into mythical form. Rather they are the means by which human populations continually seek out the meaning of things and elaborate the mental schemas that determine how they see and experience the world that they inhabit. In concrete terms, how does this work?

Lévi-Strauss treats myths that are linked in a series of transformations as a cognate group. Each myth in the group, however dissimilar it appears to be from other myths in the group, is related to a common armature, a logico-sensible schema that could be said to be the matrix of that transformational series. The matrix has no concrete existence; it is a logical system whose features are deduced by the mythographer. It is, as Lévi-Strauss puts it, the virtual chess board on which the myths of a given transformational group play out their respective games (1978c: 168; 1968: 137). And this schema or matrix is the logical tool that the myth uses to 'solve' – mediate – the problems to which it is applied.

Let us take an example of a 'problem without a solution' inspiring a myth. There exists a series of Amerindian myths that tell the story of a journey, made in a canoe, by a couple consisting of the moon and the sun (see *Mythologiques*, vol. III, part 3). These myths, Lévi-Strauss argues, are all concerned with the problem of travel and the paradoxical concept of distance to which it relates. The paradox – of which Lévi-Strauss as an anthropologist, that is a specialist of *distant* cultures, is well aware – is that as the journey progresses, that which was near becomes far and that which was far, near. At the end of the journey, the values of the near and the far – like the positions of the passengers of the canoe in one version of the myth – have switched, and distance has turned into its opposite, the absence of distance.

Lévi-Strauss shows that the myth tackles this paradox at a number of different levels, each corresponding to a different 'code' present in the myth. The myth is concerned with the problem of the distance between the poles of the near and the far (geographical code), but also that of the distance between the moon and the sun (astronomical code) and the distance between human beings (sociological code). The function of the myth is to offer a structure that enables the conversion (translation, transformation) of the schema/structure expressed in one code into the terms of another code ('astronomical' into 'geographical', 'geographical' into 'sociological', etc.). By uncovering the conversion that governs this process, the mythographer makes sensible the system of relationships that link one code to the next and, by extension, the rules of transformation at work in the myth.

The structural function of the canoe in these myths is to mediate or *arbitrate* between two kinds of extreme situations symbolised by the poles of the near and the far and which correspond, at the level of the astronomical code, to two kinds of disruption in the periodic alternation of night and day and, at the level of the sociological code, to two kinds of disruption in the institution of marriage. As we will see, in contrast to these extreme (polar) situations, life in the canoe at the mid-point in the journey represents how things ought to be in an ideal world. These myths are fundamentally concerned with the problem of what founds natural and social order, and how both kinds of order are related.

In Amerindian thought night-time is construed as a *disjunction* between the sky and the earth and day-time as a *conjunction* of the sky and the earth. At the level of its logical armature, the function of the canoe is to keep 'conjunction' and 'disjunction' themselves at the right distance from one another. This is what happens when the canoe is positioned at the mid-point in its journey.

However, the canoe can be positioned along the horizontal axis of the mythical journey in one of three basic positions: far, near or intermediary. Each myth of the transformational group chooses a different point along this scale, thereby realising one of the possible variants allowed by the underlying schema. In other words, some myths relate to the departure from the pole of the near, others to the journey itself and a third kind to the arrival at the pole of the far.

When the canoe reaches the pole associated with the 'far', 'disjunction' has increased to the point of becoming absolute. Myths that play out their games at this end of the virtual pole of the transformational series tell the story of a total divorce between light and darkness, resulting in either eternal day or eternal night. All forms of natural phenomena that temper

the opposition between absolute lightness and absolute darkness are abolished: moon- and starlight, the Milky Way, rainbows, the shadow of clouds all disappear (Lévi-Strauss, 1978c: 112–13; 1968: 91). At the pole of disjunction, the pole of the far, *the possibility of mediating between night and day, light and dark, is lost*. And the result, according to mythical thought, is a world that has become literally rotten. Differences become absolute and can no longer be overcome.

Conversely, when the canoe is at the pole associated with the near, it is 'conjunction' that is at its greatest. At this pole of the canoe's journey, myths tell stories that encode problems that correspond to a situation that is logically the *inverse* of the one outlined above. These are stories about the merging of night and day and the abolition of the myriad distinctions that make daily life possible. Here, it is not the divorce between the sun and the moon that threatens the world but their excessively close relationship, resulting in such phenomena as eclipses, a symbol for the abolition of the opposition between the distant and the near. Here, mediation becomes hyper-mediation (an excessive mediation) and *differences are abolished*. The result is not a rotten world, but a burnt world.

By means of the structural schema outlined in the preceding paragraphs, canoe mythology relates the geographical problem of the relationship between the far and the near to the cosmological problem of the alternation of day and night and, as we shall now see, the sociological problem of marriage (the next step in the series of transformational connections). To sum up the schema so far, each pole of the journey is associated with a different kind of disruption of the proper alternation of night and day, due to the institution of either an excessive *distance* or an excessive *proximity* between the moon and the sun. In each case, the result is a dysfunctional state of affairs: either the absolute divorce of light and dark or their dangerous fusion. How does this relate to the problem of marriage? Translated into the terms of the sociological code that constitutes the next level of reading of these myths, the opposition between near and far, light and dark, disjunction and conjunction becomes – is transformed into – that between an excessively close marriage (i.e. incestuous) and an excessively distant one (i.e. with a foreigner or enemy), a situation myths evoke in the motif of the marriage of a male hero and an animal, where marriage occurs beyond even the limits of the human species. These are the two excesses (*sociological* disruptions) against which society needs to guard itself in order to guarantee the proper functioning of the institution of marriage and hence *the regular alternation of generations* (the biological equivalent of the alternation of night and day).

In contrast with these dysfunctional ('polar') situations, life in the canoe at the mid-point in its journey, as I have already indicated, corresponds to a temperate ideal in between the burnt and rotten extremes of incest and an excessive form of exogamy or chastity. The long and narrow canoes used by the Amerindians require a minimum of two passengers: at the front the stroke, whose action keeps the boat moving, at the back the steersman who directs it. The canoe is constructed in such a way that, once in motion, neither passenger can get up or move without threatening to overturn it. They are seated at a predetermined and fixed distance from one another and bound in a relationship of mutual interdependence. During the journey in the canoe, husband and wife, moon and sun, are therefore placed at exactly the *right* distance from one another – neither too far nor too close. This guarantees, on the one hand, the proper alternation of night and day (light and darkness) and, on the other, marital concord (and harmonious sexual relations).

In keeping with the principle enunciated above that a myth does not solve the problems around which it develops but merely converts them into another code, the answer of Amerindian mythology to the sociological problem 'who should I marry?' is: someone who is neither closer nor further than the moon is from the sun when night alternates regularly with day. Mythical thought provides a logical armature to encode a problem and then seeks out other homologous problems and establishes between them the mytho-poetic correlations that are the fabric of myths. The possibility of establishing new correlations is endless. For example, the motif of the institution of the regular alternation of night and day (where both are of equal length), which we have already seen corresponds to the sociological motif of marriage at the right distance, may further be related to an episode that occurs in certain myths in which a divinity makes a river flow simultaneously in both directions: upstream and downstream. As Lévi-Strauss points out, this enables it to be travelled both ways *in the same lapse of time* (it normally takes much longer to travel upstream than downstream). This motif, Lévi-Strauss argues, is a spatialisation of the temporal problem of the periodic alternation of day and night (here the 'periods' are translated into distances (1978c: 166; 1968: 134)). In each case, the myths are concerned with the same problem, that of the creation of order from disorder, which is construed either from a temporal point of view, a spatial one or a sociological one. Yet another group of myths addresses this problem using what Lévi-Strauss describes as an 'anatomical code', where the human body is made to fulfil the same mediating function between disjunction and conjunction as the canoe is in other myths. These

myths tell the story of a male hero who either doesn't possess a penis and for whom therefore even a 'close' marriage is impossible, or who possesses a penis that is so long that only distant marriages are possible. Order, here, is only achieved when man acquires a reproductive organ that is of the right length to institute marital relations with spouses that are neither too close nor too far, in other words, from social groups beyond the kin group and local community yet not so far for it to be impossible for the respective groups to be integrated into a higher-order social structure than family and tribe, i.e. an international community.

As Suzanne Saïd (1993: 98) has rightly pointed out, Lévi-Strauss's theory of 'primitive' myth belongs in the allegorical tradition of mythical exegesis which originated in classical antiquity (Lévi-Strauss is a great admirer of Plutarch's work on myth, which he ranks higher than anything else written on this topic). However, Lévi-Strauss adds to this theory in a way that modifies it fundamentally. Allegorical interpretations see myths as a message in code; myths are a vehicle for a hidden meaning. For example, according to one of Homer's earliest exegetes, Theagenes of Rhegium, the battle of the gods described in Book xx of the *Iliad* in fact denotes the battle of the elements in the universe – Apollo is fire, Poseidon, water, etc. (1993: 75). A myth is a code. Lévi-Strauss does not disagree fundamentally with this principle of allegorical exegesis, but shows that myths are constructed not out of a single code, but out of the superimposition of multiple codes, each code converting another in a process of translation/transformation in which there is no original content. No single code has a thematic or logical priority over any other code (Lévi-Strauss's criticism of Freud on myth is that he always favours the psycho-sexual code). Each code is traceable to antecedents whose point of origin is lost in time. And, at each retelling of a myth, the problems expressed in any code can always be connected to new codes and serve as the point of departure of further logical connections (what distinguish one myth from another – makes its originality – are its choice of codes and the way in which it structurally relates them). Lévi-Strauss compares the structure of a 'primitive' myth to that of an orchestral score. In a similar way that a score is made up of the superimposition of several instrumental parts, a myth, says Lévi-Strauss, is made up of the superimposition ('stacking') of several mythical 'codes'. A myth, in this respect, is a logical structure that enables the conversion of one 'code' into another – a translating machine of sorts. It is this musical polyphony of codes that, according to Lévi-Strauss, best describes the nature of mythical discourse.

FROM MYTH TO ART

We have been pursuing Lévi-Strauss's theories and speculations about myths in some detail because his ideas about aesthetic creation grew directly out of these theories and speculations, although Lévi-Strauss himself does not say so explicitly. Amerindian myths revealed to Lévi-Strauss the existence of a transformational logic that appeared to lie at the very core of the process of creation. The unravelling of this logic in the *Mythologiques* gives rise to the formulation of a general theory of the creative act and, in a series of texts written after the *Mythologiques*, to a number of applications or extensions of the mythological paradigm to other domains, which I propose to examine here. Lévi-Strauss has written, first, about the transformations that have affected Northwest Coast masks, transposing his method of analysis to the domain of the plastic arts, and then to the Grail legend and its transformation from Chrétien de Troyes's twelfth-century romance about Perceval (*Le Conte du Graal*) to Wagner's opera *Parsifal*. More recently still, leaving behind the context of narrative, he has analysed the transformations behind the genesis of one of Poussin's best-known paintings, the *Arcadian Shepherds*. These texts show, in the act as it were, that transformations similar to those which are responsible for the conversion of one myth into another are also at work in Western art. In the next section I will show that, to use Lévi-Strauss's expression, 'one never walks alone along the path of creativity' (1982: 148; 1979a: 128); that consciously or unconsciously he/she is always transmuting the work or influence of others who have come before. This process echoes the way myths are handed down, transmuted and reinvented.

The view of the creative process that Lévi-Strauss derives from his analysis of myths can be compared, in certain respects, to the view of poetic creation that Harold Bloom developed at more or less the same time as the *Mythologiques* were written, in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1997). Lévi-Straussian transformations play a similar role to the acts of 'misprision' that Bloom places at the heart of the phenomenon of poetic influence. Misprision is a deliberate and creative misreading (i.e. transformation) of the works of one poet (the precursor) by another (his/her follower). However, for Bloom this process implies a more consciously agonistic relationship between precursor and follower, whereas for Lévi-Strauss the transformational process is unconscious and collective (the work of art exists at the junction between an individual act of creation and collectively transmitted schemas that are part of culture). Influence, for Lévi-Strauss as for Bloom, does not manifest itself in a series of echoes or imitations but,

on the contrary, in the ways in which one artist (or myth-maker) opposes, i.e. differentiates himself/herself from, others. Mytho-poetic transformations are the means of this act of differentiation and resemble, in this respect, Bloom's 'revisionary ratios', whereby a later poet deliberately 'swerves away' from the poets that preceded and influenced him – Shakespeare from Marlowe, Milton from Spenser, Mann from Goethe. In his work on totemism Lévi-Strauss had already formulated the principle that: '*it is not the resemblances, but the differences, which resemble one another*' (1964b: 77; 1962a: 115). The following view of myth also applies to art: 'there is never any original: every myth is by its very nature a translation, and derives from another myth belonging to a neighbouring, but foreign, community' (1981: 644; 1971a: 576). There is, here, something distinctly 'post-modern' about Lévi-Strauss's theory of mythical creation which anticipates, although this is often ignored by contemporary critics, theories of intertextuality. Bloom's thesis, that 'the meaning of a poem can only be a poem, but *another poem – a poem not itself*' (1997: 70), repeats more or less verbatim Lévi-Strauss's dictum: 'the meaning of a myth is another myth'. Lévi-Strauss enunciates this general principle of creation (which works in time or in space) most emphatically in *The Way of the Masks*. He is writing here about the different styles of masks made by a group of neighbouring Amerindian populations (Northwest Coast of Canada):

The originality of each style . . . does not preclude borrowings: it stems from a conscious or unconscious wish to declare itself different, to choose from among all the possibilities some that the art of neighbouring peoples has rejected. This is also true of successive styles. The Louis XV style prolongs the Louis XIV style, and the Louis XVI style prolongs the Louis XV style; but, at the same time, each challenges the other. In its own way, it says what the preceding style was saying in its own language, and it also says something else, which the preceding style was not saying but was silently inviting the new style to enunciate . . . When he claims to be solitary, the artist lulls himself in a perhaps fruitful illusion, but the privilege he grants himself is not real. When he thinks he is expressing himself spontaneously, creating an original work, he is answering other past or present, actual or potential, creators. Whether one knows it or not, one never walks alone along the path of creativity. (1982: 144 and 148; 1979a: 125 and 128)

To take a closer view of the voyage along the path of creation, as Lévi-Strauss depicts it, let us look in greater detail at how he sees the transformational process that led to Wagner's *Parsifal*.¹ Lévi-Strauss traces the

¹ I am pooling together, here, arguments made in the following essays: 'The Scope of Anthropology' (1978b: 3–32; 1973a: 11–44); 'Le Graal en Amérique' (1984: 129–137); 'From Chrétien de Troyes to Richard Wagner, and a Note on the Tetralogy' (1987b: 219–39; 1983: 301–24).

mytho-poetic operations that connect Wagner's opera, first performed in Bayreuth in 1882, to earlier versions of the story by Chrétien de Troyes (*Perceval, ou Le Conte du Graal*, c. 1180) and Wolfram von Eschenbach (*Parzival*, c. 1200–1210).² But this is not the only axis of transformation that leads to Wagner's opera. Lévi-Strauss also advances the argument that the myth of Perceval is, in essence, an inverted version of the myth of Oedipus. The 'proof' that he offers for this contention is an impressive piece of structural analysis, and whether it is entirely convincing or not, it is sufficiently ingenious as to merit examination.

With the story of Oedipus, Lévi-Strauss focuses in particular on the episode of the Sphinx. In terms of the linear development of the plot, Oedipus' solving of the riddle of the Sphinx is what leads to the incestuous union with his mother. Thebes is under the domination of the Sphinx and when Oedipus solves her riddle, forcing her to kill herself, he is offered in reward the throne of Thebes and the hand of Laius' widow Jocasta, his own mother. The two episodes are functionally related: the one leads directly to the other. But is this the only connection between these two episodes? The solving of the riddle of the Sphinx is one of the most famous moments of the myth, and, over time, it has also turned out to be one of its most enduring features. All of this points towards a deeper rationale for its presence in the story.

In *S/Z* Barthes suggests that, in a narrative, a group of actions make up a sequence that readers identify by subsuming it under a general title, such as 'a Walk', 'the Murder', 'a Rendez-vous'. The sequence is created by the very process of naming it, Barthes argues. He terms these sequences 'proairetic', and their assemblage into a sequential narrative the 'proairetic code'. Lévi-Strauss, in his reading of the Oedipus myth, is also concerned with the proairetic code, in particular two of its key sequences to which one may give the titles 'Oedipus solves the riddle of the Sphinx' and 'Oedipus commits incest with his mother'. However, unlike Barthes, for whom the sequences are freely strung together – 'the sequence exists when and because it can be given a name . . . it is useless to attempt to force it into a statutory order' (Barthes 1974: 19) – Lévi-Strauss argues that these sequences may be structurally related to form a system. He reads the story 'vertically', superimposing the Sphinx episode on the incest episode and treating them as transformations of one another, rather than as separate episodes belonging to a succession of events. In this way, he brings

² The question of Chrétien's and Wolfram's own antecedents is itself the subject of much scholarly speculation.

to light two codes (linguistic and sexual) in the myth and the structural correspondences that link them together. In Lévi-Strauss's concept, a riddle (*énigme*) may be defined as a question whose answer should not be found, a question without an answer. Therefore, in solving the riddle, Oedipus unites a question and an answer that should have been kept apart. In this respect, the Sphinx episode exemplifies a figure of communication that may be described as an 'excess of communication'. Oedipus' incestuous relations with his mother constitute an 'excess of communication' of a different kind (sexual), and similarly unite two 'terms' which should have been kept apart: 'Like the solved riddle, incest brings together terms meant to remain separate: The son is joined with the mother . . . *in the same way as the answer succeeds, against all expectations, in rejoining its question*' (1978b: 23; 1973a: 34, my italics).

Lévi-Strauss saw that the myth of Oedipus reiterates (re-encodes) its central theme, the theme of incest, in terms of a figure of communication, the solving of a riddle. There exists between these two themes the same code-to-code relationship of transformation as there exists, in canoe mythology, between the motif of the regular alternation of day and night and that of marriage at the right distance. This reading of Oedipus reveals meaningful ('vertical' or 'harmonic') correspondences within the story that are indicative of an underlying mytho-logic at work in it. And this mytho-logic functions here in the same way as it does in 'primitive' myths, that is by *translating* one problem, the problem of incest, into the terms of another to which it may be formally compared, the problem of 'excessive communication'.

How does this relate to the Perceval legend? In the Perceval legend, Lévi-Strauss focuses on the central episode in the castle of the Grail. Perceval is invited into the castle of the Grail by the Fisher-King, whose freedom of movement is impeded because of an injury to his legs, and is served a sumptuous meal. As he dines, a young man holding a bleeding spear, and two young girls, the one holding the Grail – a cup encrusted with precious stones – and the other a silver tray with food on it, appear. This mysterious cortège passes before Perceval and disappears into a neighbouring room. Remembering his mother's advice always to be discreet, and despite his curiosity, Perceval does not dare ask about the spear or who is being served in this way. It turns out that his decision to remain silent is a terrible mistake. Had Perceval asked the question that, he will later find out, was in fact expected of him, the Fisher-King would have been cured of his injury and the spell on the land of the Grail, causing its infertility, would have been lifted.

What is the significance of this episode? Lévi-Strauss shows that the myth of Perceval is constructed on the model of the linguistic figure of 'the answer to which there is no question', that is, an inversion of the figure of the riddle, construed as an 'énigme', which is a question without an answer. And, in a similar way that the latter 'plot-formula' corresponds to a type of myth which explores the problems of 'excesses in communication' (in the multiple senses which may be given to this expression), the former, argues Lévi-Strauss, corresponds to a type of myth which explores the problems of dysfunctional or interrupted communication (again, in the multiple senses of the term communication).

In opposition to the incest of the Oedipus myth, the Perceval legend, according to Lévi-Strauss, is concerned with the problem of excessive chastity, impotence and infertility. In the Oedipus myth one is presented with a clever hero who answers every question and who abuses sexual 'communication' to the point of committing incest; in the Perceval legend one is presented with a chaste and virginal hero who does not know how to ask a question. Chastity, virginity and impotence are equated with the linguistic figure of an answer to which a question is not provided, incest to the figure of the question which, best left unanswered, is abusively answered.³

Thus, Lévi-Strauss reads Perceval in terms of how it is structured around the model of the 'answer without a question', revealing how various narrative sequences encode in diverse ways – transform – and reiterate the problem of interrupted communication. As I have already mentioned, Perceval's mother forewarns him of the dangers of being excessively talkative. This leads to the blunder in the castle of the Grail. Significantly, for Lévi-Strauss, at the very moment that Perceval discovers his mistake – that is, *his failure to have communicated with others* – he suddenly guesses his own name, which until then had remained unknown to him. In other words, *he re-establishes communication with himself*. The character who reveals to him his mistake in the castle of the Grail is a cousin of whose existence Perceval had been unaware. When Perceval encounters his

³ The associations belong to a deep and old pattern in Lévi-Strauss's thought and are to be related to the theory of shamanism that he develops in 'The Efficacy of Symbols' (1963a) and to the following passage from the even earlier *Elementary Structures of Kinship*: 'Certain facts taken from psychopathology already tend to suggest that the relations between the sexes can be conceived as one of the modalities of a great "communication function" which also includes language. For certain sufferers from obsessions, noisy conversation seems to have the same significance as unbridled sexual activity. They themselves speak only in a low voice and in a murmur, as if the human voice were unconsciously interpreted as a sort of substitute for sexual power' (1969a: 494; 1967a: 566). See note 7 to my conclusion for the connections with 'The Efficacy of Symbols'.

cousin, she is grieving the death of her lover, who has been decapitated by a knight. She recognises the sword Perceval is carrying and reveals to him that it is defective and will break as soon as Perceval uses it in combat. For Lévi-Strauss these episodes also encode the motif of interrupted communication – interrupted communication with the self (severed head) and interrupted communication with the other (broken sword).

The mytho-poetic problem around which the Grail story (in its many guises) revolves is: how to re-establish communication where it has been wrongfully interrupted. Conversely, the problem that Oedipus-type myths try to solve is: how to interrupt communication where it has been abusively instituted. In one case, the myth is concerned with a problematic form of disjunction, in the other, with a problematic form of conjunction (one is reminded of the two poles of the canoe journey mentioned above).

And the problems of excessive disjunction and excessive conjunction are further transformed, at the level of what one might refer to as the 'environmental code', into opposite forms of natural disasters.

The world of Oedipus is a world of accelerated communication. This is also expressed, argues Lévi-Strauss, in the acceleration, or explosion, of natural cycles with the Theban plague. Excessive communication and incest are associated with rotting and rankness. Conversely, in the Perceval legend, in which communication between individuals and groups is interrupted, there is a halting of natural cycles, leading to the infertility of the land, an eternal winter and a frozen, immobile world.

One can see here how Lévi-Strauss, transposing what he has learnt about the structure of 'primitive' myths to these well-known Western narratives, reveals the element of mythical thought contained in them. Here too, one can see the problem-solving function of myth at work seeking out new ways of encoding and, in the process, transforming a mytho-poetic structure, thereby generating new aesthetic forms.

The myths are constructed out of a network of interlocking analogies which establish formal correspondences between three types of periodicities: those which regulate verbal exchange in dialogue, those which regulate sexual exchange in society, and those which regulate the cycle of seasons in the calendar year.

How does this mytho-poetic analysis shed light on Wagner's opera *Parsifal*? Wagner drew on many different sources which, in the manner of Lévi-Strauss's *bricoleur*, he modified, rearranged and combined for his own purposes. To create the character of the enchantress Kundry, for example, he fused four characters from Chrétien and Wolfram (1987b: 230; 1983: 313). In addition, he returned to her identity in the fourteenth-century

manuscript known as the *Mabinogion* in which she is a reincarnation of the biblical figure of Herodias, who was condemned eternally to wander the world for having laughed at the head of John the Baptist (which Wagner changes to laughing at Christ's suffering on the cross). The siren-like Flower Maidens in the service of the evil sorcerer Klingsor (Clinschor in Arthurian romance), who seduce and kill the Knights of the Grail with the exception of the chaste Parsifal, have antecedents at once in Arthurian legend, in a twelfth-century text entitled the *Roman d'Alexandre*, which figures forest-dwelling girls who live underground during the winter and come to life when they flower in the summer, and also in an episode in Indian mythology about the Bodhisattva who, during his meditation under the Tree of Wisdom, resists the seductions of the daughters of the demon Mâra whose deadly arrows transform into flowers. One recognises here similar processes of modification and reorganisation as occurred in the Amerindian story of Botoque, who is made to climb a rock to collect eggs that are either in the nest or not in the nest, that transform into stones or that start off as stones, that are caught/not caught by someone who is on one occasion his brother, on another a passing jaguar, etc.

Lévi-Strauss's argument is that, whilst drawing on these and other sources to put together his own creation, Wagner intuited the mytho-poetic schemas they contained and produced his own transformation of them, a synthesis of the Oedipus and Perceval myths. In short, Wagner displaces the problem of interrupted communication from the domain of sociology and cosmology to that of morality and metaphysics. At the same time, he provided a new and original answer to the mytho-poetic problem of what communication is or should be.

The social and cosmological problem that lies at the core of the early versions of the Perceval story told by Chrétien and his immediate successors is how to reconnect two worlds between which communication has been interrupted. These worlds are the world of the here-below, represented by the court of King Arthur, and the world beyond, represented by the castle of the Grail (from an anthropological point of view, we may view these two worlds as figurations of the world of the living and the world of the dead). When Perceval leaves the castle of the Grail after having failed to ask the question that was expected of him, its entrance disappears, and despite his best efforts Perceval cannot find it again. In Wagner's story there are still two worlds, but their nature and significance have been transformed. The court of King Arthur does not figure at all in Wagner's *Parsifal*. Wagner's opera depicts the battle that opposes the Christian kingdom of the Grail, governed by the stricken ruler Amfortas (from the

Latin *infirmitas*), and the pagan kingdom of the sorcerer Klingsor, who wishes to steal the Grail from Amfortas. Lévi-Strauss's argument is that while the first of these kingdoms corresponds to a Percevalian world of interrupted communication, analogous to the one we encounter in the earlier myths, the second corresponds to an Oedipal world of excessive (or accelerated) communication. Wagner, in a sense, internalised the dichotomy that until then had opposed the Perceval myth to the Oedipus myth and combined, on a single stage as it were, the worlds characteristic of each type of myth in a single myth.

The 'Oedipal' features of the kingdom of the magician Klingsor are manifest, for example in the latter's ability to see at a distance (= accelerated communication) and in the incestuous atmosphere of Kundry's attempted seduction of Parsifal: 'With the last kiss of your mother, receive the first kiss of love' (as cited 1987b: 233; 1983: 317), she sings in her attempt to entice him. Later, Kundry invites Parsifal to embrace her just like his father Gamuret once embraced his mother Herzeleide. In addition, the chromatism of the music itself reinforces the sense of an unhealthy world of excessively close communication – like the chromatic scale, this is a world of small intervals. This world is opposed to that of the Grail, the kingdom of Amfortas. Incapacitated by the wound that he has received from the Sacred Spear he can no longer perform the Sacrament of the Grail, whose knights are gradually perishing and whose land is infertile.

The mytho-logical problem that underpins Wagner's opera is no longer how to re-establish communication between these two worlds. Klingsor's kingdom and the kingdom of the Grail do not represent two worlds that have become disjoined, but alternative versions (one desirable, the other not) of the same world, and between which humanity must choose. How, then, does the motif of interrupted communication – the key to the mytho-poetic schema that Wagner inherited from his predecessors – figure in his opera? Lévi-Strauss's answer is that in Wagner's version of the Grail story the disjunction is no longer external but internal to Parsifal himself.

In Wagner's story the nature of the Grail and of the question raised in the castle of the Grail has changed. Wolfram had already modified the appearance and function of the Grail as it figured in Chrétien's story. For the latter, the Grail was a cup encrusted with precious stones which Perceval sees passing before him and which is used to serve someone whose identity is not revealed (the Fisher-King who in later versions becomes Amfortas). Wolfram changes the cup into a magical stone which has the power of dispensing food and drink on command. Wagner returns to the earlier appearance of the cup but retains Wolfram's function. But, more

significantly still, in Wagner's *Parsifal*, the episode no longer revolves around the unasked question: 'who is being served?' – indeed, everyone is being served, since the Grail dispenses food and drink at will.

Parsifal is cast as an 'innocent fool'. Amfortas has been injured by the spear that was once thrust into Christ's side. He receives from it a wound that cannot be healed, except by contact with the holy spear itself, now in Klingsor's possession. Parsifal witnesses the ceremony of the Grail and sees Amfortas' bleeding wound but *he fails to understand the significance of what he has heard and seen*.

It is here that Wagner stages a form of interrupted communication analogous to yet different from the one that occurs in earlier versions of the Grail myth. The disjunction here takes on a moral and metaphysical connotation. Communication is interrupted because Parsifal fails to recognise Amfortas' suffering. The disjunction occurs in Parsifal's own psyche, between what he sees and what he feels, between his sensibility and his intellect, and, by implication, it is also a disjunction between suffering humanity and the rest of us.

In a single moment of revelation, Parsifal finally understands the significance of the scenes that he witnessed in the castle of the Grail, of the nature of Amfortas' wounds and of his own mission (to retrieve the Holy Spear and cure Amfortas). It occurs when, through a magical identification with Amfortas' suffering, he *relives* Amfortas' agony in his own flesh (this moment occurs when Kundry, in her attempt to seduce Parsifal, gives him his first kiss).

Parsifal can only understand the significance of the bleeding wound by himself going through the drama at the origin of these wounds, that is, through *empathy* with the stricken ruler Amfortas: 'Enlightened through compassion, the innocent fool, the appointed one', sing the squires in Act I, Scene 1. And it is here that Wagner's version of the Grail story offers a new solution to the mytho-poetic problem of interrupted communication. To ask a question or to solve a riddle is an operation of the intellect, but Wagner's Parsifal solves the enigma of the Grail *because he is capable of feeling pity*. In Wagner's version of the Perceval legend, the problem of communication which lies at its heart finds a solution that is affective. In this way, the problem of compassion is introduced into the series of mythical transformations. The unasked question that the King awaits from Parsifal – previously: 'Whom do you serve?' – becomes: 'Why are you suffering?' In the course of the transformation of one myth into another, what has changed is the myth's conception of what communication is, or may consist of. Understanding through pity is unlike the forms

of communication with which Chrétien's and Wolfram's stories are concerned. The essence of pity is that 'one must know and not know . . . [in] other words, one must know what one does not know' (1987b: 234; 1983: 318). Lévi-Strauss's interpretation of *Parsifal* reveals here another sequence of transformations that connect Wagner to Schopenhauer and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Wagner's mytho-poetic transformations are of their time). For one of Wagner's most important contributions to 'universal mythology', according to Lévi-Strauss, is to have recognised, in *Parsifal*, that compassion and man's ability to identify with others constitutes a primal form of communication.

Within the Lévi-Straussian paradigm, the process whereby artists assimilate the works of preceding artists is the process whereby – knowingly or unknowingly – they inscribe their own act of creation in a series of transformations. The schemas that they intuit in the works of antecedent artists orient their own creative act. But at the same time, they transform these schemas and find new solutions to the mytho-logical problems to which they relate. The artist's freedom to invent is therefore not absolute. His/her originality lies in the way that he/she reorganises these inherited schemas to create something new.

The process of inheritance and transformation elaborated above in relation to a literary/musical work is examined in relation to a famous painting in Lévi-Strauss's most recent work *Look Listen Read* (1977; 1993). In this book Lévi-Strauss offers a new interpretation of one of Poussin's most famous paintings *Et in Arcadia Ego*, better known as *The Arcadian Shepherds*. Here, as in his reading of the Perceval story, his interpretation reveals at work in painting a transformational dynamic that parallels that which we have already seen to be at the heart of the process of myth making.

Poussin produced two paintings on the theme of the Arcadian Shepherds, the first around 1630, and the second five or six years later. The earlier of the two versions drew its inspiration directly from a painting by Guercino on the same theme, painted at the beginning of the 1620s. Lévi-Strauss argues that the three paintings correspond to three stages in a sequence of transformations in the course of which Guercino's original composition is gradually assimilated by Poussin and reorganised, to be born again as Poussin's *Arcadian Shepherds*.

The title of all three paintings is the Latin formula 'Et in Arcadia ego'. This formula is normally translated as 'I, too, have lived in Arcadia.' The Guercino painting represents two shepherds absorbed in the observation of a skull (which occupies a prominent position in the foreground of the

painting) placed on a rock. Thus, the painting may be interpreted as follows: it is the skull who is speaking, and who is saying: 'I too exist, even in Arcadia.' In the happiest of places man cannot escape his destiny.

In Poussin's 1630 version of the *Arcadian Shepherds*, a first set of transformations have occurred. These represent, according to Lévi-Strauss's interpretation, an intermediary stage between the Guercino composition and Poussin's second version. First of all, in the 1630 version the rock has been replaced by a sarcophagus, and it is on the sarcophagus that the Latin formula 'Et in Arcadia ego' is engraved. But more significantly still, in Lévi-Strauss's opinion, the skull has been much reduced in size: from its prominent position in the foreground of the Guercino painting, it has been moved to the background in the Poussin painting. Furthermore, a shepherdess, absent from the Guercino version, appears in the background of Poussin's first painting of this subject.

The significance of these transformations is borne out when one views them in the light of Poussin's second version. One notices, first of all, that the skull has now entirely disappeared as well as the shepherdess, but that the foreground of the painting is dominated by a mysterious female figure, draped in Ancient Greek robes. As one passes from one version of the painting to another, Lévi-Strauss suggests, the skull gradually disappears, to be replaced by the female figure who, in the final version, comes to occupy the foremost position. The skull and the woman switch positions according to a formal manipulation not dissimilar to the rhetorical figure of chiasmus. Thus, according to Lévi-Strauss, in Poussin's second version, the female figure in the foreground is an embodiment of death, and it is she, therefore, who is speaking the words 'Et in Arcadia ego.' And it is this figuration of death as a maiden that, according to Lévi-Strauss, explains the great appeal that this painting has always had: 'It draws its powerful attraction from the intimation that the mysterious woman standing by the three shepherds does not belong to this world; that she is the manifestation in this rustic setting of a supernatural presence that, in different guises, always looms in Poussin's landscapes' (1997: 18; 1993a: 22).

Furthermore, seen in the light of the transformational connections that link the three versions, it would seem that Poussin's first painting (the intermediary version in the series of three) offers a key to the formal operations whereby the series as a whole was engendered through transformation. In Poussin's first version of the *Arcadian Shepherds* the figure of an old man occupies the same position that the skull does in the Guercino version. The old man is meant to represent the Alpheus river whose source is in Arcadia and which, legend has it, flowed across the sea to Sicily to

rejoin the nymph Arethusa, transformed into a fountain. The image of the river – more precisely, of the direction of its flow (towards the nymph Arethusa) – leads the spectator's imagination, Lévi-Strauss argues, from the skull in the first version, to the other female figure in this series of transformations, the maiden who has 'come from elsewhere', the female embodiment of death in Poussin's late version. In other words, the painting, by means of the symbolic figure of the old man, offers a clue to the structural transformations that link it to the version that preceded it and to the one that comes after it, and which it therefore anticipates. The implicit idea is that the later version was in a sense already 'contained' in the first version and that the second, intermediary version, reflects this fact.

MYTH AND MUSIC

The discovery that the same creative logic that is present in Amerindian mythology may also be found in other aesthetic creations produced far away from Amerindian myths and in very different conditions is one of the conundrums that lie at the core of the *Mythologiques*. It suggests a possible common basis to many different forms of creative acts. In this chapter I have shown that, for Lévi-Strauss, this creative act is transformational by nature and that myths provide a complex model of the specific operations by which this transformational process occurs, at least in forms of artistic creation that are close to myth. Lévi-Strauss's intuition of a trans-cultural creative process is further supported by the deep connection that he establishes between myth and music, in particular, Amerindian mythology and classical Western music. Let us explore this connection further.

For Lévi-Strauss, the connection between myth and music is metonymic as well as metaphoric (1978a: 44). There are at least two senses in which Lévi-Strauss means this. First of all, Lévi-Strauss frames his ideas about the interrelation between mythical and musical invention in a historical hypothesis, namely that the musical forms that were developed by Frescobaldi in the early seventeenth century, by Bach in the eighteenth century, and later by Mozart, Beethoven and Wagner, already existed in European mythology, indeed were rescued from mythology when it started to decline after the medieval period. As he puts it: 'It is exactly as if music had completely changed its traditional shape to take over the function – the intellectual as well as the emotive function – which mythical thought was more or less giving up at the same period' (1978a: 46). The same argument is developed at greater length in *The Naked Man* (1981: 652–3; 1971a: 583–4), where Lévi-Strauss identifies more precisely the

moment when music emerged as a kind of inverted image of myth: the invention of the fugue (1971a: 583). Secondly, if myth and music have a metonymic as well as a metaphorical connection, it is because, says Lévi-Strauss, myth and music were both born from natural languages; they are both the product of transformations of the system of language, although these transformations occurred in different directions. Lévi-Strauss points out that music is like language in as much as it combines elementary units (the musical notes, equivalent to phonemes) into higher-order structures. However, unlike language, in which one may identify at least three successively 'higher' levels of organisation – that of phonemes, that of words and that of the sentences – in music there are only two: the musical notes are immediately integrated into musical phrases at the next level of organisation. Conversely, with myth, Lévi-Strauss argues, 'there are no phonemes; the lowest elements are words' (1978a: 52). For Lévi-Strauss mythical discourse is integrally contained in the narrative, hence the relative ease with which it may be translated into another language (the opposite is true of poetry, in which the phonetic level of organisation is integral to the production of meaning, which is why it cannot be translated without loss). In myth, the message is, relatively speaking, detached from its linguistic base and housed in higher-order elementary units (mythemes). Lévi-Strauss compares myth and music to two sisters born from language who have each gone their separate way, never to meet again (1978a: 54). 'Music', he explains, 'emphasises the sound aspect already embedded in language, while mythology emphasises the sense aspect, the meaning aspect, which is also embedded in language' (1978a: 53). Or as he explains in *The Naked Man*: 'Musical and mythic structures, being less completely embodied than the latter [linguistic structures], but more so than the former [mathematical structures], are biased, in the case of music, in the direction of sound (without sense) ['décollée du sens, adhère au son'] and, in the case of myth, in the direction of sense (without sound) ['décollée du son, adhère au sens'] (1981: 647; 1971a: 578). This provides Lévi-Strauss with an explanation of how music signifies. Music, he claims, bears the negative mark of the linguistic structures from which it was separated at birth. When we listen to music, we intuitively supplement the missing half, i.e. the sense aspect.

For Marcel Hénaff (1998: 175–8), if Lévi-Strauss finally turned to a musical 'model' to theorise myth, it is because this model provided him with the means of getting beyond some of the limitations inherent in the linguistic (phonological) model that he had used until then. The key issue, here, is that of the translatability of myth, more precisely of its formal

structures. Myths offer the image of a symbolic system whose value is 'essentially characterised by its operative power' (1998: 178), i.e. its meaning is located in the operations it carries out. It is in this respect that it resembles music. The meaning of myths, like that of music, lies, as it were, outside of myth; it is supplied by the listener. So in a sense, myths, like musical compositions, are untranslatable into anything other than themselves. In short, Hénaff argues that music provides Lévi-Strauss with a perfect analogon for myth, i.e. it provides him with a tool for re-encoding mythical operations without translating them into an 'extrinsic' language (natural language). The models provided by music are better suited for understanding the structure of myths. My main point here is that music is more than an analogon or metalanguage for Lévi-Strauss, although it may *also* be that. The connection between the two is rooted in an altogether deeper, more organic necessity.

It is the structures and patterns that we detect in music that differentiate it from noise. What we read into music is a series of meaningful combinations, which we can sometimes identify precisely. As specialists have shown, the rhythmic sequence used by Bartók in the third movement of 'Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta' is the musical version of a mathematical pattern first discovered by the twelfth-century mathematician Fibonacci. Gershwin uses the same sequence in 'It Ain't Necessarily So' in *Porgy and Bess*. Amerindian myths, like musical compositions, contain numerous mathematical patterns, not only algebraic but also geometrical. *The Origin of Table Manners* is concerned with mythical variations that are organised like Klein groups. Lévi-Strauss's canonical formula – $f_x(a) : f_y(b) :: f_x(b) : f_a^{-1}(y)$ – attempts to grasp a pattern of mythical genesis. At first glance, the formula seems a daunting series of mathematical notations which may leave the non-specialist reader wondering about its meaning. The formula is no more than a mathematical description (translation) of a formal structure that may be embodied in a number of other ways (it can be played, for example, on a piano). It constitutes a kind of 'double-twist' (Maranda 2001: 4). Expressed in rhetorical terms, its basic structure is chiasmic. In *The Naked Man*, Lévi-Strauss proposes to view the chronological development of musical styles in popular culture or from one composer to the next as a transformational series. In the present context, it would not be implausible to posit that this development may also possess its own algorithm. What these examples show is the communality of the structures with which we create, which is also one of the fundamental aesthetic lessons of the *Mythologiques*. In *The Naked Man* Lévi-Strauss argues that four types of entities are susceptible of

being analysed structurally: mathematical entities, natural languages, musical works and myths (1981: 647; 1971a: 578). A closer examination of the act of creation, or process of discovery, as it is practised in each of these domains reveals a common feature: pattern searching. This is the tie that unites each of these domains within a single structural field.

Contemporary neuroscience shows that this pattern searching and pattern producing function occurs at the most elemental levels of interaction of mind and sense organs. Diana Deutsch, Professor of Psychology at the University of California at San Diego, has carried out research on aural paradoxes. She has examined what happens when two separate series of notes, which do not form ordered sequences when played separately but do when combined in a certain way, are played into each ear. These will be 'rearranged' in such a way that what the ears perceive are two ordered pitch sequences (Robertson 1996: 7). The production of patterns and the production of meaning are inherently connected. When neuroscientist Robert Zatorre used a PET scan to compare neurological responses to tonal music and unmusical noise, he found that only the former affected the right hemisphere, commonly associated with emotion and meaning (1996: 12).

To understand the aesthetic significance of the patterns evoked above, one needs to extend the notion of translation to include a kind of pre-verbal form of 'translation', which one may see as one of the common features of a trans-cultural and trans-historical creative imagination. What I am designating here is not translation in the ordinary sense – it is not the conversion of one cultural code into another: we have already seen that at this level both music and myth are untranslatable. This is a hard-wired form of translation, rooted in the body. It designates the commutability of certain perceptual structures, which may be transposed from one sensible support to another. It is what explains, for example, that listening to a piece of music elicits a response from the occipital area of the brain, which is exclusively associated with visualisation, even if one is listening to the piece of music with one's eyes closed (1996: 13). It is what explains the spontaneous connection made by most listeners between musical patterns, in particular scales, and motion (1996: 8). Dance, in this respect, is not an accidental cultural creation. Its presence in populations throughout the world, like that of music, verifies what neuroscientists are beginning to piece together scientifically, namely that the mental manipulation of musical structures is inherently connected to the way in which we plan and carry out physical actions (1996: 8). Here, the ability to *plan* sequences is of primary importance. As Paul Robertson puts it: 'Our ability to recognise patterns of movement and imagine them modified by action is

the essence of spatial imagination and the key to human ascendancy' (1996: 19). In 'Eye and Mind', Merleau-Ponty writes that to understand the process of painting one must think of the body not as a 'chunk of space' but as 'an interweaving of vision and movement' (2004: 294). At yet another level, what this process of translation involves, at least in the case of music, is the conversion of the body's rhythmic systems (the many biological clocks ticking away in us) into tempo relationships (1996: 30). In their own way, these examples confirm Lévi-Strauss's intuition that musical works are schemas coded in sounds and myths are schemas coded in images (1981: 654; 1971a: 585). It follows that one may therefore, at least in part, 'translate' (in the sense given above) the one into the other.

The music-myth dyad lies at the heart of Lévi-Strauss's system of thought. His many aesthetic insights and intuitions revolve around this central analogy. For example, other forms of art, in particular painting, are theorised in terms of their conformity or non-conformity to the paradigm that it provides. Lévi-Strauss's unravelling of the connections between mythology and music has enabled him to cast an original light on aesthetic phenomena, but it has also inflected his approach in sometimes obscuring ways. The premise that myth and music are analogous entities emphasises the structural elements in both. This occurs at the expense of other dimensions, in particular phenomenological. The latter is arguably more important in music than in myth. The emotive power of music resides not only in the patterns it contains but in the immediately perceived physical quality of certain sounds (including their particular tone-colour), hence the inherent emotive power of certain unique voices. Furthermore, the ability to show how one pattern converts into another leaves intact the problem of why certain patterns/structures affect us more than others or are valued more than others, or why the same pattern may be used to create great works of art and kitsch. Lévi-Strauss, here, does begin to give an answer. His point is about music but it applies more generally: musical structures need to be imagined from the outset as systems of sounds, not as abstract structures that are *subsequently* given life as a sequence of notes (he may have serial music in mind here). In other words, it is not possible to use disembodied formal structures artificially to create works of art.

The central importance granted to the commutability of myth into music obscures other axes of aesthetic 'translation', among them that which links painting and music. Although I do not have the space to do so here, it would be revealing to confront Lévi-Strauss's aesthetic ideas with Kandinsky's. Kandinsky, who was influenced by Schoenberg, with whom

he had a lengthy correspondence, thought of his 'Compositions' according to an analogy with symphonies. He was concerned with the 'inner sound' produced by the juxtaposition of colours and shapes and with the way in which motifs recurred at different pitches. Kandinsky used line, shape and colour to create impressions of movement, which he controlled as effectively with visual means as a composer with musical means. What sets apart Kandinsky's *Composition VI* (1913) from his *Circles on Black* (1921) is the very different sense of movement that each creates: in the first it is rapid, chaotic and has multiple origins; in the second it is slow, regular and centred, like revolving planets.

Finally, one may question Lévi-Strauss's basic idea that music and myth were born from language. As we have seen, Lévi-Strauss conceptualises music and myth as transformations *in different directions* of the system of language. He compares myth and music to two sisters born from language who have each gone her separate way, the one towards sound, the other towards sense. Would it not be more plausible to switch this model around? Recent research shows that babies recognise musical structures from six months (Robertson 1996: 10). Furthermore, what babies first respond to in language are particular voices and the tonal and rhythmic qualities of what is being said (1996: 10). In short, should we not derive language and myth from music?

Lévi-Strauss's mytho-poem

In the preceding chapter I have argued that the *Mythologiques* is a book about aesthetics; a treatise on the aesthetic doubling as a study of Amerindian myths. What I will show in this chapter is that if the *Mythologiques* is concerned with aesthetic problems and, in particular, the mechanisms of aesthetic creation, it is because it is itself, at yet a third level of interpretation, an aesthetic creation. Beyond the anthropological project, beyond the aesthetic treatise, one may also read the *Mythologiques* as Lévi-Strauss's own mytho-poem.

What critics have often overlooked is that the *Mythologiques* is the work as much of a creative writer as of a theoretician and critic and that, furthermore, both kinds of 'work' are intimately related. It is a text with at the very least a dual identity. The project of the *Mythologiques* is indeed a scientific one. Lévi-Strauss is the inventor of a *method* of analysis and provides throughout the *Mythologiques* a running commentary on his own application of this method (the *Mythologiques* are characterised by a complex form of reflexivity). In such passages, he writes about 'hypotheses', 'demonstrations' and 'proofs'. The scientificity of Lévi-Strauss's method is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in those passages of the *Mythologiques* where he applies transformational formulas to a myth *predicatively*, logically deducing one myth from another. This is what Lévi-Strauss calls a 'transcendental deduction' and it constitutes an example of the quasi-mathematical rigour with which Lévi-Strauss applies his system of analysis (1981: 549; 1971a: 491–2 and 1973b: 38; 1966a: 31). But, such 'deductions' are also eminently 'aesthetic', in as much as they make manifest the hidden connections that link myths into a single whole and bring to light the necessity that lies at the heart of mythical transformations.

The *Mythologiques* are more than an extended exercise in applied structural analysis. If one looks more closely at Lévi-Strauss's methodological statements, one realises that, at another level, they also describe an act of

personal creation. In this connection, the *Mythologiques* cannot be viewed simply as the result of applying a 'detachable' method of analysis to a corpus of texts. Lévi-Strauss's 'scientific' (methodological/critical) statements are a running commentary on the practice – experience – of analysing myths. The 'scientific deductions' are inseparable from that personal experience. And the particularity of this experience – and this is what will interest me in this chapter – was that it involved Lévi-Strauss himself in an act of creation, moreover unconscious creation.

The mystery of the *Mythologiques* lies in Lévi-Strauss's ability to confer a certain universal validity (heuristic value) to the exploration of the mechanisms of creation of his own unconscious. In this respect, his method is close to that of the intuitionists in mathematics, such as Henri Poincaré (1854–1912), who believed that 'to make geometry, or to make science, something else than pure logic is necessary' (as cited Miller 1996: 353). Poincaré's own account of his discovery of automorphic functions reveals a complex interplay of unconscious thought processes leading to sudden illuminations ('intuitions'), and their careful working out and verification by means of conscious thought. This is also, in many ways, the way in which the series of the *Mythologiques* appears to have been elaborated. The work of Lévi-Strauss the mytho-poet is not at odds with that of Lévi-Strauss the myth-analyst. One may pass from one level of reading to another without contradiction; rather, doing so provides insights into the complexity of Lévi-Strauss's discovery procedures, the extent to which they constitute total acts involving conscious and unconscious processes, memory, the imagination and aesthetic intuition as well as reasoning and formalisation.

In *Intertextuality*, Graham Allen distinguishes the structuralist critic from the post-structuralist critic in the following terms: 'If structuralist literary critics believe that Saussurean linguistics can help criticism become objective, even scientific, then poststructuralist critics ... have argued that criticism, like literature itself, is inherently unstable, the product of subjective desires and drives' (2000: 3). The *Mythologiques* series is, according to the above definition, as much a work of post-structuralism as of structuralism. Ostensibly a work of analysis, it is at the same time the product of 'subjective desires and drives', among the main, arguably, Lévi-Strauss's desire to become himself a creative artist. Lévi-Strauss reveals in the very last pages of *The Naked Man* that he wrote the *Mythologiques* to compensate for his inability to compose music (1981: 649; 1971a: 580). He explains that this work, which has intrigued and caused controversy as a scientific text, is nothing other than his attempt at

creating, with words and mythical images instead of sounds, the mirror image – the ‘negative’ to be more precise – of a symphony. And Lévi-Strauss means this literally, since he adds that ‘some day, some composer could well try to produce the positive image’ (1981: 649; 1971a: 580). Whether or not he has succeeded in this particular enterprise is for musicologists to say. What is clear to the literary critic, however, is that the Lévi-Strauss of the *Mythologiques*, far from remaining the detached analyst, crosses the boundary that separates the analyst from the creative writer in order himself to ‘perform’ (I will say more about this later) a new version of the system of Amerindian mythology. It is this transformation of the mythographer into a creative writer of sorts that the wish to have created ‘a symphony in words’ expresses.

The *Mythologiques* expound a method of analysis, and at the same time a general theory of creation. A theory of mythical creation *and a theory of Lévi-Straussian creation*. While the *Mythologiques* are on one level about a process that occurs in the outside world (the genesis of Amerindian myths), they also reflect an inner process of imaginative creation or re-creation. The one is understood through the other. The *Mythologiques* should therefore also be read as a description of Lévi-Strauss’s own inner experience of the creative act required of him by the study of myths. In his essay about Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* (which Lévi-Strauss read and admired), Baudelaire reminds us that poetry came first and then engendered, by way of a reflexive doubling back on itself, the study of the rules of poetic composition, i.e. criticism. He remarks that: ‘all great poets naturally and fatally become critics . . . a crisis inevitably occurs when they feel the need to reason about their art, to discover the obscure laws in virtue of which they have created, and to extract from this study a set of precepts whose divine aim is infallibility in poetic creation’ (Baudelaire 2003b: 124). The Lévi-Strauss of the *Mythologiques* is in many ways a critic in the Baudelairean sense, even if he does not share the critic’s ‘divine aim’ – i.e. he is a creator turned theoretician of his own practices, trying to discover ‘the obscure laws by virtue of which he has created’. Beyond their primary aim of describing the genesis of Amerindian myths, Lévi-Strauss’s theories, formalisations and methodological statements are essentially reflections *après coup* on his own creative activity, a creative activity that was necessary to the act of mythological exegesis.

In this connection, I will seek to show that Lévi-Strauss is a collage artist of sorts and that the *Mythologiques* are a mytho-poetic creation in the sense that they are an assemblage of citations whose meaning, once the citations have been reassembled by Lévi-Strauss, has been transformed. Put

differently, Lévi-Strauss is like a film editor who has been given film segments to put together (the myths) and has ended up creating with them a very personal work. According to this view, the real inventor/author of the *system* of Amerindian mythology is Lévi-Strauss himself. Although, evidently, he is not the inventor of the individual myths that make up the system, in putting together his own particular combinatorial arrangement of mythical elements (his means of cracking the code of myth) Lévi-Strauss has constructed his own version of Amerindian mythology, a vast collage of citations, whose meaning he has reinvented in order to tell us another story that is contained in latent form, as his theory would have it, in its indigenous matrix. What can be perceived in such a reading of this work is the story of an impossible quest for a lost time, a golden age prior to the 'death of myths', when structures had not yet lost the battle with seriality and the meaning of the world we inhabit was yet to be destroyed by History and a conception of time as a succession of events. In the concluding section of this chapter, I will return to the Lévi-Straussian 'story' outlined above, which I will tell in more detail. But first, I propose to examine more closely why the *Mythologiques* may be seen as a form of literary creation, and what kind of literary creation.

THE ACT OF INTERPRETATION AND THE STRUCTURAL UNCONSCIOUS

If the *Mythologiques* may be viewed as a form of mytho-poetic creation in their own right it is first of all because of the role that Lévi-Strauss attributes to his own unconscious in the act of critical interpretation. This is revealed in comments that Lévi-Strauss has made in a number of texts, including interviews, that belong to the margins of the *Mythologiques*. These marginal comments tell a different story from the one that emerges from the methodological/programmatic statements contained in the core of the text. In the preceding chapter I said that one of the premises of Lévi-Strauss's 'method' for interpreting myths is that myths that seem enigmatic or nonsensical when considered on their own can be made sense of when seen as transformations of other myths. Lévi-Strauss therefore proceeds, throughout the *Mythologiques*, by revealing the hidden connections that relate seemingly unrelated myths, which are thereby organised into series and then broader macro-structures. In the finale to *The Naked Man*, Lévi-Strauss reveals that for the connection between one myth and another to be brought to light requires a long period of what he calls 'incubation'. The myth has to be submitted 'to a slow process of incubation requiring hours,

days, months – or sometimes even years – until one's thought, guided *unconsciously* by tiny details, succeeds in embracing the essential nature of the myth' (1981: 632; 1971a: 565, my italics). Here, it is not so much the application of a method of analysis that reveals the transformational relationship between one myth and the next as the slow assimilation of the mythical material into Lévi-Strauss's own unconscious. In order to understand how myths transform, Lévi-Strauss has to *experience* these transformations in his own unconscious.

This is made even clearer in another interview with the literary and film critic Raymond Bellour, which took place a number of years before the one I have just been discussing, whilst Lévi-Strauss was still writing the *Mythologiques*. About his 'method' of work Lévi-Strauss says here:

The composition ... always opens out simultaneously on several levels. The reason why I start with one myth instead of another is largely subjective. After that, like an octopus, I spread the tentacles of my analyses in different directions. The myth is first of all supplemented by ethnographic documentation which replaces it in a live context. However, once I have related a myth to a local context, I try to relate it to other myths on the basis of the intuition that they have common structures. This operation is not the outcome of a premeditated plan: I am the intermediary through which the myths reconstruct themselves. I try to be a place through which myths pass. (1967b: 3, my translation)

One may relate these comments to another from *The Naked Man*: 'myths criticize and select themselves' (1981: 632; 1971a: 565) It is, in part, because the *Mythologiques* are a product of Lévi-Strauss's own unconscious mind (albeit, an unconscious that owes more to algebra and geometry than it does to Freud and the Oedipus complex) that his tetralogy may be described as a form of aesthetic/mytho-poetic creation in its own right. Lévi-Strauss's originality lies in his ability to make this reflexive exploration of his unconscious at work an instrument of understanding. Lévi-Strauss construes his own unconscious as a laboratory, an 'anonymous place' where fragments of myths are left free to arrange themselves, outside of his conscious control (1981: 625; 1971a: 559; 1987b: 243; 1983: 327). In accordance with this view, he sees his role of analyst and interpreter as being that of a spectator. He observes processes happening in himself. Later, he will try to describe – translate – what he has seen, using, amongst other tools, the language of mathematics. Lévi-Strauss's use of his own unconscious as a 'laboratory', and the erasure of the conscious self that this requires, is presented as a 'methodological requirement' (1981: 628; 1971a: 561–2). Structuralism describes processes that take place, as it were, of their own accord, without any reference to a subject. This is an aspect of what Paul

Ricoeur was referring to when he characterised Lévi-Strauss's thought as 'Kantism without a transcendental subject' (1970: 11; 1964a: 19), a label that Lévi-Strauss readily accepted. Lévi-Strauss argues that the erasure of the conscious self is the precondition for mythical discourse – an 'anonymous' (1981: 628; 1971a: 562), i.e. authorless, discourse in as much as it is collectively transmitted – to take shape in his own unconscious mind. In order for the process of mythical transformation (i.e. creation) to occur, the critical/thinking subject must withdraw or disappear altogether. Lévi-Strauss views the unconscious, more generally, as the terrain upon which the anthropologist may overcome the opposition between self and other and attain a certain objectivity beyond the irreducible diversity of subjective experiences (1950a: 33–4; 1987a: xxx). In the context of myth, once the unconscious transformational process has taken place, he can then apply his critical consciousness to the analysis and description of what has happened 'in him', in principle, untainted by his own subjectivity (1981: 628; 1971a: 561–2).

However, Lévi-Strauss's unconscious cannot ever be simply an 'anonymous place'. As the mythical transformations unfold in his unconscious mind, determinants other than those which first gave rise to the myths shape the mythical material. Once the myths have been filtered through Lévi-Strauss's unconscious – over periods of months, even years, he tells us – Lévi-Strauss himself becomes the author, or at least co-author, of these transformations, even if, as he claims, mythical thought is 'speaking through him', and he is simply, one might say, taking dictation. The act of critical interpretation becomes, through the intervention of Lévi-Strauss's unconscious, an act of mythical re-creation.

Lévi-Strauss's insistence that his unconscious is an 'anonymous place' in which processes beyond his conscious control unfold, and which he then describes, does not evoke so much the methods of structural linguists, the paradigm he supposedly applies in the *Mythologiques*, as the mechanisms of artistic and poetic creation. The conception of the writing self that emerges from the *Mythologiques* is that of an author in a literary sense. Indeed, it conforms more specifically to the role of the poet characteristic of the Symbolist and post-Symbolist movement, in particular those held by Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Valéry (the argument of this chapter rejoins, here, that of chapter 4).

One of Lévi-Strauss's best-known programmatic statements (to which the above considerations about the unconscious form the background) is the following one: 'I . . . claim to show, not how men think in myths, but how myths operate in men's minds without their being aware of the fact.

And . . . it would perhaps be better to go still further and, disregarding the thinking subject completely, proceed as if the thinking process were taking place in the myths, in their reflection upon themselves and their interrelation' (1970: 12; 1964a: 20). Lévi-Strauss's idea is that 'les mythes se pensent entre eux' – literally: they think one another. This statement has given rise to much debate, in particular amongst anthropologists. British anthropology – although not unanimously – has deemed it to be a nonsensical statement. Viewing the *Mythologiques* as a mytho-poem, this famous statement can be viewed essentially as a comment about the nature of the creative process in which Lévi-Strauss is engaged in the *Mythologiques*. In this context, it echoes directly what Stéphane Mallarmé wrote to his friend Cazalis, on 14 May 1867, about his own experience of poetic composition: 'I am utterly dead . . . I am now impersonal and no longer the Stéphane that you knew, – but a capacity possessed by the spiritual Universe to see itself and develop itself, through what was once me' (1988: 74).

For Lévi-Strauss, as for Mallarmé before him (I shall return to this below), the dissolution of the self is the precondition of the discovery of an intentionality inherent in language itself.¹ Valéry writes about the sonnet: 'A form can be fecund in ideas' (1998b: 145). And this is an essentially poetic experience. There is no writing subject in the *Mythologiques*. Myths think themselves in Lévi-Strauss. They generate their own critique, he says. Similarly, for Mallarmé, the writing of a work of 'pure' literature – the poetic ideal that he and the Symbolists pursued – implied, as he put it, 'the disappearance of the poet as speaker, yielding his initiative to words' (1976: 248). The poet disappears; the words themselves take over. This is also the fundamental experience of the creative process that the *Mythologiques* describe. The above programmatic statement – 'myths operate in men's minds without their being aware of the fact' – should be interpreted autobiographically, as an expression of Lévi-Strauss's personal (and poetic) experience of writing the *Mythologiques*. Myths appeared to 'think themselves in him', beyond *his* conscious control, in a similar way that words for Mallarmé 'take the initiative'. This is why Lévi-Strauss can write the following (it describes an essentially literary and poetic experience of language): 'it was not so much the case that the Self was the author as that the work, during the process of composition, became the creator of an executant who lived only

¹ For an analysis of the 'Finale' to the *Mythologiques* as a philosophical meditation on the way in which the anthropologist's subjectivity is constituted through its relationship to its objects of study see Keck: 2004b.

by and through it' (1981: 630; 1971a: 563). This is also echoed in Barthes's idea of a subject produced by the text he/she writes. The book, in a sense, gives birth to its own author. This is reminiscent of Mallarmé's comment on writing, made in a letter to Verlaine, 'my personal work . . . will be anonymous, since the Text would speak by itself and without the author's voice' (1988: 144), and of Valéry's poetic principle: 'Beautiful works of art are the daughters of their form, *which is born before them*' (Valéry 1996: 16, my translation).²

In the present context, one may view the *Mythologiques* as belonging to the literary tradition inaugurated by Mallarmé and as partaking in its aesthetic/poetic dissolution of the writing subject. Barthes, in his famous 'The Death of the Author' article, published six years after the last volume of the *Mythologiques*, comments on the significance of Mallarmé in the history of French literature in the following terms:

In France, Mallarmé was doubtless the first to see and foresee in its full extent the necessity to substitute language itself for the person who until then had supposed to be its owner. For him, for us too, it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality . . . to reach that point where only language acts, 'performs', and not 'me'. (1984: 143)

In many ways, this fits the *Mythologiques* very well too, and may be taken as a description of how it works as a mytho-poetic creation.

The preceding considerations seem to converge on the age-old, mysterious and never sufficiently explained question of the nature of inspiration. What is its source and how does it come about? There is a close analogy between Lévi-Strauss's description of the way in which myths re-create themselves in him and the way in which the character of Yuri, in Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, describes the experience of inspiration (one assumes, describing Pasternak's own experiences). It is worth quoting the passage from *Doctor Zhivago* in full, as it provides one possible answer to the question of what inspiration is, and thus also provides us with a key to the literary significance of the *Mythologiques*, which we can see as an extended experiment in the inspirational process. Yuri is sitting at his desk writing, when, all of sudden:

His work took possession of him and he experienced the approach of what is called inspiration. At such moments the correlation of the forces controlling the artist is, as it were, stood on its head. The ascendancy is no longer with the artist or the state

² One is reminded here of the phrase that Apollinaire used to characterise the colchicums which are 'like mothers daughters of their daughters' (see Chapter 3).

of mind which he is trying to express, but with language, his instrument of expression. *Language, the home and dwelling of beauty and meaning, itself begins to think and speak for man and turns wholly into music, not in the sense of outward, audible sounds, but by virtue of the power and momentum of its inward flow. Then, like the current of a mighty river polishing stones and turning wheels by its very movement, the flow of speech creates in passing, by the force of its own laws, rhyme and rhythm, other forms and formations, still more important and until now undiscovered, unconsidered and unnamed.* At such moments Yuri felt that the main part of his work was not being done by him but by something which was above him and controlling him: the thought and poetry of the world as it was at that moment and as it would be in the future. He was controlled by the next step it was to take in the order of its historical development; and he felt himself to be only the pretext and the pivot setting it in motion. (Pasternak 1996: 391, my italics)

The insight into the nature of inspiration that Pasternak provides here (it is, in effect, a theory of intertextuality) is that the moment of inspiration is linked to the discovery, by the artist/critic, of a necessity that is inherent in his/her materials, here language. How this discovery comes about is what the *Mythologiques*, over some 2000 pages, tries to trace. Lévi-Strauss in the *Mythologiques* realises (gives form to), a necessity concealed within mythical discourse. In the *Mythologiques*, the analyst becomes an anonymous vehicle through which one possible combinatorial arrangement of a virtual system – the system of Amerindian mythology – is given form. The initiative, in the creative process, however, is handed over to the system itself, rather than placed with the ‘creating’ subject. The creative impulse consequently appears to come from outside, as it does to Yuri.

Put differently, the experience of inspiration is rooted in what one might call *the inherent generativity of form*. Structures, shapes, forms that are immanent to the materials used by the artist (although also shaped by their historical and cultural context), start to generate, of their own accord, new contents. This is what Yuri refers to in the above quotation as the ‘musical’ content of language, the ‘power and momentum of its inward flow’.

There is an Amazonian myth (M354) that is told by a population called the Tucuna that contains a female character who is severed in two at the waist, and whose torso ends up affixed to her husband’s back. In volume III of the *Mythologiques*, in a section entitled ‘The Mystery of the Woman Cut into Pieces’, Lévi-Strauss explains this character as a transformation of a character in a North American myth, a woman-frog. How are these two characters related? Lévi-Strauss’s explanation is that the character of the woman-frog expresses *metaphorically* the idea of a woman who in French would be described, also metaphorically, as ‘collante’ (she won’t let go).

The female torso affixed to her husband's back expresses the same idea, but literally.

Here, we have an example of a composite character in a myth who is created – in part by the myths themselves, in part in Lévi-Strauss's own unconscious – by a rhetorical manipulation. The conversion of a metaphor into its literal equivalent is what brings about the generative process. The character of the female torso is, in a sense, 'implied' (using the term in its philosophical sense, as does Valéry in the passage cited below) in that of the woman-frog. Although brought into existence by an individual storyteller, she originates, the *Mythologiques* seem to suggest, in the rhetorical structures of language itself. I have said above, and in earlier sections, that as well as to Mallarmé, Lévi-Strauss owes a great deal to Paul Valéry. In the *Cahiers*, Valéry offers the following explanation of how he understands the poetic imagination to work:

By imagination I understand the exploiting of images – working on the image, exploring its field or universe – as logic explores what concepts imply. The image and its possibility – and not its transitivity. It amounts to considering the image as value of a system based on variations. (Valéry 2000a: 302)

This explanation of how the poetic imagination works, namely by exploring a combinatorial logic that is *inherent* to images, provides a very good account of how Lévi-Strauss goes about writing the *Mythologiques*. What interests Lévi-Strauss about the images used by Amerindian myths is not their relationship to an external referent – in Valéry's terms, not their 'transitivity' – but their logical relationship to one another. The *Mythologiques* is essentially an exploration of these logical relationships, which are none other than the transformational connections between myths. If this exploration begins as a critical enterprise – Lévi-Strauss analysing, from the outside, transformations that occur in Amerindian mythology – it ends up as creation: Lévi-Strauss forging, in his own unconscious, the transformational links that will enable him to integrate every myth into a coherent system.

For mythical thought, the opposition between the sky and the earth, and hence 'up' and 'down', is symbolically very important. Amongst other things, it corresponds to the opposition between the sacred and the profane, the land of the gods and the dwelling of man. But what interests Lévi-Strauss, the mytho-poet, about this opposition is its generativity. The relationship between 'up' and 'down', 'sky' and 'earth', the divine and the human, may logically be construed in three different ways, depending on whether the passage from 'up' to 'down' occurs in one direction (hero goes

up), the opposite direction (divinities come down), or both (human beings and gods switch place). Furthermore, the axis travelled by the heroes of these myths may be vertical (this gives rise to the preceding opposition between 'up' and 'down'; 'sky' and 'earth') or, alternatively, it can be rotated so as to become horizontal, at which point the opposition between 'up' and 'down' transforms into that between 'near' (for example, the hero's village) and 'far' (for example, the forest or mountains). Each set of oppositions engenders, in a cascade, a new set of oppositions through a series of logical operations, verifying the principle of the 'inherent generativity of form' mentioned above. And each solution – combinatorial variation – corresponds to the invention, in the Amerindian imagination and the Lévi-Straussian unconscious, of another myth.

THE MIRROR OF MYTH

What I have shown so far in this chapter is that the structural analysis of myths becomes, almost imperceptibly, an act of mytho-poetic re-creation. I have also revealed some of the links that, beneath the surface, connect the *Mythologiques* to Symbolist poetry, and I have shown that the whole of the *Mythologiques* provides a parallel of the inspirational process. One of the conclusions that emerges from these insights into the literary (mytho-poetic) nature of the *Mythologiques* is that Lévi-Strauss decodes the hidden meaning of Amerindian myths not by applying an extraneous method of analysis to the mythical material, or indeed by imposing an interpretation on the myths, but by actualising – giving body to – a new combinatorial arrangement of the mythical system. He *performs* a version of the system of Amerindian mythology. And, even though, according to his own theories, it was a version that was contained in latent form in the mythical material itself, in the course of his own rearranging, Lévi-Strauss inevitably creates something new, his own mytho-poem.

In practical terms, what do I mean when I say that Lévi-Strauss performs a new version of the system of Amerindian mythology? Myths present Lévi-Strauss with a series of enigmas. The images/sequences that they contain seem incoherent or absurd. As I have already explained at the start of this chapter, he makes sense of them by showing that each myth is made up of images that are transformations of other images belonging to other myths. In other words, he reveals that the meaning of a myth is to be found at the level of what today would be called intertextuality. His 'method' consists in patiently connecting myths together, completing a giant puzzle. What I am proposing here is that although the myths themselves are not of

Lévi-Strauss's making, these connections essentially are. The primary materials, the images, the original stories are all Amerindian, but it is Lévi-Strauss who 'writes' the intertext, who invents the links that connect one myth to the next and integrates them into a coherent whole. And in as much as the meaning of a myth is intertextual, he is also, in a sense, (re)writing the myths.

It is worth reiterating, here, that the above 'mytho-poetic' reading of the *Mythologiques* does not invalidate this work as a work of science. It has, after all, had a following among anthropologists and provided usable concepts/insights for interpreting myths and other material. Even if the transformational connections that Lévi-Strauss generates in his own unconscious (creates as opposed to discovers) do not correspond to actual Amerindian transformations that could be historically and empirically verified (and some of them probably do correspond to transformations that are verifiable in this way), his work provides a model of how such a transformational system *might work*. He constructs a working hypothesis, or, more accurately, an analogon of how the system of Amerindian mythology may be structured. He might himself have called it a 'modèle réduit'. And this 'modèle réduit', although overdetermined in its genesis, can then be applied to other materials, i.e. put to the test in the real world by others after him.

The preceding discussion of the *Mythologiques* elaborates on what Barthes and Derrida both saw as one of the distinguishing features of this text, namely the atypical status of Lévi-Strauss's critical discourse. Derrida describes it as 'mythomorphic' because it has 'the form of that of which it speaks' (2005: 363). Barthes sees it as partaking in the cultural revolution that has seen the transformation of critical discourse into a literary genre (1987: 66). In many ways, it corresponds to Barthes's ideal of the 'writerly' text, which weaves together many discourses and codes and involves the reader in an active role of production rather than a passive role of consumption. These views reflect Lévi-Strauss's own concept that, if all myths are transformations of other myths, his own interpretations of Amerindian mythology are themselves simply another version of it, its latest transformation to date. In this respect the *Mythologiques* may be read as a post-modern literary creation, a collage of citations.

The key to Lévi-Strauss's role as mytho-poet is already contained, in embryonic form, in his metaphor of *bricolage*, which he formulated in an earlier work, *The Savage Mind*, initially as an analogy for the work of the 'primitive scientist', which Lévi-Strauss opposed to that of the engineer. The concept of *bricolage* has been much discussed and much

misunderstood. Lévi-Strauss's portrait of the *bricoleur* is a disguised self-portrait. How and why becomes clearer if one applies the concept to the *Mythologiques* and attempts to view this work as the work of a *bricoleur* mytho-poet.

The *bricoleur* is a specialist in combinatorial logic, a craftsman who creates objects by rearranging other objects. A chair looked at differently is a shelf, and a shelf potentially a table. Lévi-Strauss comments in *La Pensée sauvage* that the *bricoleur*'s objective, given any set of elements (his stock), is to obtain 'the group of its transformations' (1966b: 20; 1962b: 34) – i.e. the sum total of their possible combinatorial arrangements. And he continues, emphasising the part played by combinatorial thinking in *bricolage*: 'each [element] represents a set of actual and possible relations; they are "operators" but they can be used for any operations of the same type' (1966b: 18; 1962b: 31). And this is what the *Mythologiques* are, the work of a *bricoleur* mytho-poet who combinatorially rearranges one set of elements to create another.

What the *bricoleur* does when he/she reassembles the components of one object to create another is bring to light another set of possible relations between those components. This is essentially what structuralism does. In Lévi-Strauss's aesthetic theory, it is what the artist does when he/she creates a new version of the world that is a new combinatorial variation of it.³ It is also what Lévi-Strauss does when, as an interpreter of myths, he dismantles and reassembles myths in order to understand them. And finally, it is what the mythmaker (whether indigenous or not) does when he/she transforms other myths to make his/her own.

The combinatorial rearrangement of elements – *bricolage* – is not a gratuitous act. The process of rearranging these elements – the act of modifying their relationships – is the *bricoleur*'s source of knowledge and understanding (which is why Lévi-Strauss's unconscious can also be a laboratory). It is the process whereby the work of the *bricoleur* – the mythmaker, the artist, the mythographer – fulfils a cognitive function. It is a means of experiencing and understanding the world, as a system of relations. It is also the key to Lévi-Strauss's analytical 'method' in the *Mythologiques*, and the explanation of why the study of myths must necessarily involve Lévi-Strauss in an act of personal creation.

One could compare Lévi-Strauss, the mytho-poet, to the mythological figure of Echo, also a *bricoleur* of sorts. Echo was in love with Narcissus but

³ See his article on the German painter Anita Albus, 'To a Young Painter' (1987b: 248–57; 1983: 333–44).

unable to declare her love because the goddess Hera had deprived her of the normal use of her voice. Echo was condemned by Hera only to be able to repeat the last words of sentences spoken by others in her presence. Nevertheless, Echo finds a way of communicating with Narcissus by repeating only those words that, once arranged by her, express what she wants to say. Echo reuses Narcissus's words (quotes them), but gives them a new meaning simply in the way that she strings them together. This is also, in a sense, what Lévi-Strauss does with Amerindian myths. In putting together his own particular combinatorial arrangement of mythical elements, Lévi-Strauss has constructed his own version of Amerindian mythology, a vast collage of citations, whose meaning he has reinvented in order to tell us another story, albeit one that, as his own combinatorial theory of creation would have it, may have been contained in latent form in its indigenous matrix.

That Lévi-Strauss's approach to understanding Amerindian myths requires an act of re-creation, the realisation of a new combinatorial arrangement of the myths that he has collected, explains why Lévi-Strauss's conception of his relationship to these myths involves, at its very heart, the notion of a creative *interaction* between myth and mythographer. In *Histoire de Lynx* (a late addition to the *Mythologiques* series) Lévi-Strauss uses a chess metaphor to describe the mythographer's task. Myths are the opponent, and the aim of the analyst is to guess his opponent's strategy – in the present case, the hidden rules of transformation that connect, like so many moves in the mythical game, one myth to another. And, in as much as different itineraries through the corpus of myths are possible – Lévi-Strauss could have worked his way from North to South America instead of the reverse – each 'game' could have been played differently, and is therefore no more than one realisation among a series of other possible but unrealised games. In other words, each time that a myth is told or read (retold, reread) a new game is played, each one revealing new networks of structural relations and hence generating new versions of the myth in question.

The same principle – that each reading of a myth realises another possible version of that myth – applies to the reader of the *Mythologiques*. As Lévi-Strauss explains in the introduction to the third volume of the *Mythologiques*, the reader is free to assemble this work in a number of different ways. Its constitutive elements form part of an adjustable 'transformational set', to use the language of the *bricoleur*. In volume III of the *Mythologiques*, *The Origin of Table Manners*, Lévi-Strauss even draws up a chart of the different sequences in which it is possible to read the three

volumes, recommending 1,2,3; 2,3,1; 2,1,3 and 3,1,2, but discouraging the reader against 1,3,2 and 3,2,1 (1978c: 16; 1968: 10).

In this light, the *Mythologiques* do not appear so much as a work of mythological exegesis, or a treatise on the aesthetic, not even a poem, but rather as a kind of textual version of installation art, an 'assemblage', to use the expression coined by Jean Dubuffet, which is interactively performed by its 'readers'. (Lévi-Strauss did in fact make three-dimensional paper models, resembling mobiles, of certain mythical structures.)

Valéry, paraphrasing Degas, writes that art is the product of an obscure mathematics whose exact rules and axioms have yet to be discovered (1998a: 11). He quotes Degas as saying – but he is also thinking of himself – that painting is the result of a series of 'operations'. Such a description also fits Lévi-Strauss, who, through his own obscure mathematics, has found a way of re-encoding the distant message of some two thousand Amerindian narratives and creating his own story, which, by way of a conclusion to this chapter, I would now like to tell.

Perhaps the place where this concealed Lévi-Straussian narrative is expressed most clearly is in 'From Myth to Novel', section 2 of volume III of the *Mythologiques*, *The Origin of Table Manners*. It deals with a seemingly technical, even anodyne problem, the discovery of an atypical transformation in Amerindian mythology. This transformation will, in fact, prove to be of great significance for an understanding of the relationship between code and narrative structure in 'primitive' myths. It is also, as we shall see, the symptom of a series of important transitions in mythical thought, to which Lévi-Strauss will confer a broader significance, one that offers a key to the deeper 'story' that he tells in the *Mythologiques*.

The transformation occurs in the South American Tukuna myth M60, 'The Misadventures of Cimidyüë' (1978c: 114–16; 1968: 92–4), which tells the story of the mishaps that befall a wife who, abandoned by her husband during a hunting expedition, tries to find her way back to her father's home. The particularity of this myth is that unlike the others in its transformational series, such as M354 'Monmaneki and His Wife', the episodes of the story it tells do not seem to follow a rigorously determined order. Their sequence could have been altered or other episodes added to the myth, without substantially changing the myth's meaning. Furthermore, the story that it tells does not come to a proper end, although it has the appearance of closure. The narrative structure of the myth of Cimidyüë, compared to that of the myths it transforms, is more 'supple' (1978c: 118; 1968: 95). Its structure, Lévi-Strauss suggests, is analogous to that of a serialised novel or soap (1978c: 130; 1968: 105). The expression that he uses

to characterise this myth, and others constructed like it, is 'mythe à tiroir' (1978c: 130; 1968: 105). With the other myths analysed so far, what occurred at the level of the surface narrative was determined by underlying structures. This myth, however, has started to cut its ties with its structural levels of organisation. This has produced the modification to its structure that I have mentioned, but it has also resulted in a freer narrative, emancipated from the determinism of underlying structural schemas.

What Lévi-Strauss reads into this modification of the structure of an Amerindian myth is the birth within Amerindian mythology of a form of narrative that he describes as *novelesque* (1978c: 130–1; 1968: 106). And he will argue that this new form of narrative is the result of the serial degeneration of mythical structures, a process that he refers to elsewhere as 'the death of myth'.⁴ With the myth of Cimidyuë 'something irreversible occurs'. And he explains: 'like laundry being twisted and retwisted by the washerwoman to wring out the water, the mythic substance allows its internal principles of organization to seep away. Its structural content is diminished. Whereas at the beginning the transformations were vigorous, by the end they have become quite feeble' (1978c: 129; 1968: 104–5). Lévi-Strauss had already invoked a similar principle in an earlier article, 'Structure and Form' (1978b: 115–45; 1973a: 139–73), to theorise the generic difference between myths and fairy-tales. In this essay, a close reading and critique of Propp's seminal *Morphology of the Folktale*, he presents the fairy-tales as less organised (or less structured) versions of myths: 'the tales are constructed on weaker oppositions than those found in myths. The latter are not cosmological, metaphysical, or natural, but, . . . local, social, and moral . . . the tale works with minimized oppositions . . . [which] indicate a lack of precision which allows the shift to literary creation' (1978b: 128; 1973a: 154).

Lévi-Strauss presents the serial degeneration of mythical structures as the result of a transformation in the mythical use of the astronomical code that is itself contemporary with the disappearance of this code from the manifest content of the myths that use it. The total system of the astronomical code (only ever partially realised by any given myth) opposes two conceptions of time: structural and serial (1978c: 110–13; 1968: 89–91). Within this system certain kinds of astronomical phenomena – such as constellations – are associated with long-term periodic intervals (constellations appear and disappear on an annual basis) but others, such as the moon and the sun, with shorter periodicities. Thus, the moon, by virtue of its

⁴ See 'How Myths Die' (1978b: 256–68; 1973a: 301–15).

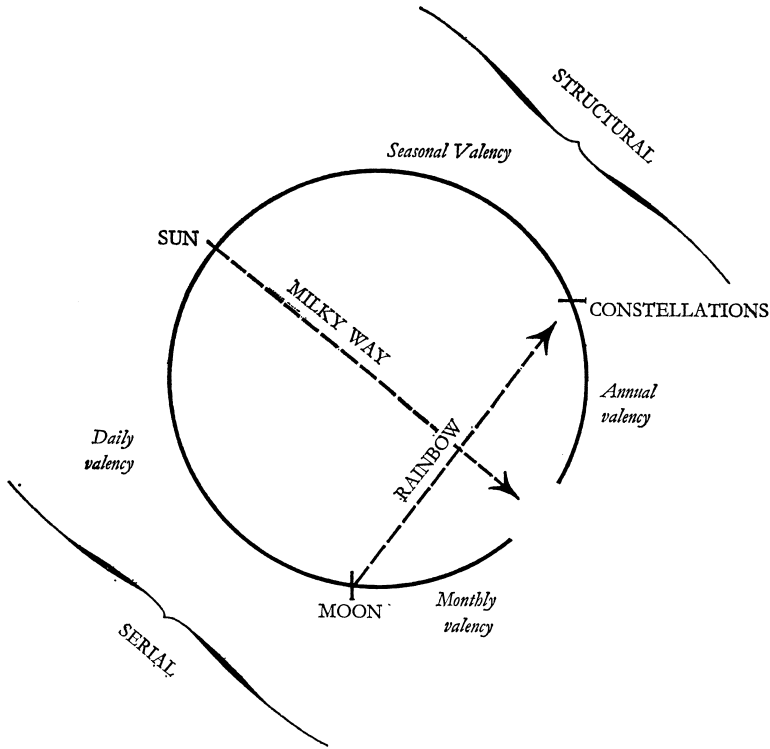


Illustration 5: 'Forms of Periodicity' (in *The Origin of Table Manners*). Diagram by Claude Lévi-Strauss. Illustrates 'adherent' logic, here in the form of a system of temporal intervals mapped onto astronomical periodicities.

monthly cycle, may also be used to signify medium-term periodicities, and the sun, which is paler and lower in the winter than in the summer, seasonal ones. When used in opposition with one another, the moon and the sun can signify a yet shorter periodic interval, that of the alternation of night and day. Lévi-Strauss's analysis of the myth of Cimidyüë reveals that it operates a passage from a more meaningful stellar code, used to signify events that are of major importance for the organisation of daily life, such as the phases of the hunting calendar, to an inherently more monotonous and less meaningful lunar code, signifying the alternation of night and day (as Lévi-Strauss puts it: 'The seasons are in opposition to each other, but the days are all alike' (1978c: 111; 1968: 91)). Said differently, the myth of Cimidyüë substitutes a short periodicity in place of a long-term one. This explains the serial degeneration of its narrative structure mentioned above.

In M60 and other myths of its kind (M317; M402–4) the episodes that make up the narrative are shoe-horned into either a twenty-four- or a twelve-hour time span. This impoverishes the myths in much the same way, writes Lévi-Strauss, that the novel is impoverished by its serialisation in the daily press. In both cases, a temporal structure imposes its law on a content, although in the first case the constraint is internal, and pertains to the nature of the signified (the lunar code it uses), whereas in the second it takes the form of an external constraint imposed on the nature of the signifier by its conditions of production (1978c: 130; 1968: 105). (Certain scenes in contemporary Hollywood action movies may be seen to take this logic one step further still, in their use of on-screen clocks, counting down the minutes and seconds to some disastrous event, a time-span during which the film's hero is reduced to an automaton repeating over and over again the same gestures, until the clock is stopped and the disaster averted.)

One is now in a position to understand better the nature of the *Mythologiques* construed as Lévi-Strauss's own mytho-poem. Its function is to provide a distant image of our own culture, as seen, *en abyme*, in the mirror of myth, here the myth of Cimidyüë. In his book on the history of aesthetic thought, Mark Jimenez comments that the significance of ancient Greece to the Romantics was to provide them with 'the point of view from which one may contemplate western civilisation from its origins and see culture as a process, an evolution and hence as mortal' (1997: 167). This is also the function of Amerindian mythology for Lévi-Strauss, although it does not present to Western civilisation the image of its own *historical* origin but rather a hypothetical or virtual point of origin. The Cimidyüë myth fulfils, in this respect, a premonitory function. The process whose beginnings it announces – the death of myth through serialisation – mirrors the change that, in Western civilisation, Lévi-Strauss would like to have us believe, was at the source of the emergence of the modern imagination, represented here by the novel form. The story of Cimidyüë becomes an allegory for the transition from a mythical to a post-mythical world, a process that is construed by Lévi-Strauss as degeneration, serialisation and death.

According to Lévi-Strauss's own argument in the *Mythologiques*, the serial degeneration of myth occurs because of the introduction into mythical thought of a new form of periodicity, i.e. of a different conception of time, one might have said, of a *modern* (Western) conception of time. In its transition from a stellar to a lunar code, the mythological conception of time speeds up. What Lévi-Strauss does not say in the *Mythologiques* is that the conception of time adopted by these 'serial myths' corresponds to the

conception of time (and history) that elsewhere, he has argued, characterises large-scale industrial – or ‘hot’ – societies.⁵ Western time, in the Lévi-Straussian paradigm, is essentially serial time. There is here an echo of Walter Benjamin’s argument in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’. Modernity is characterised by repetition, responsible in one case for the loss of the ‘aura’ of the work of art, in the other that of the structural coherence of mythical thought. Lévi-Strauss’s ‘hot’ societies place past and present on a single continuum: the rail-tracks of progress. ‘Hot’ societies, says Lévi-Strauss, ‘interiorize history . . . and turn it into the motive power of their development’ (1969b: 39; 1961: 45), thereby promoting a conception of time as a serial arrangement of events.

By contrast ‘cold’ (traditional) societies conceive of the present, on the model of myth, as at once emerging from the past and as *parallel* to it. They trace the origins of human society to a mythical past from which they have broken away, but, at the same time, this mythical past continues to exist in the present, in an atemporal mode, embodied in nature. Societies that adhere to a mythological conception of time interpret the present as a projection of this order. In ‘cold’ societies there is indeed a ‘before’ and an ‘after’, but their function is to reflect one another. Time, instead of being arranged in a straight line, is inscribed in a circle and therefore in a sense – even if only symbolically – cancelled out.

Seen as a literary creation, the *Mythologiques* bring about a chiasmic switching of positions of the familiar and the exotic, the far and the near, analogous to the one I described in my introduction. Lévi-Strauss’s interpretation of the degeneration of the myth of Cimidyuë tells the story of the birth of the modern imagination from the fall of myth, the passage within Western civilisation, to a historicised conception of time, and the concomitant abandonment of the ‘logico-natural’ (1978c: 130; 1968: 106) order that founds the conception of the world characteristic of ‘cold’ societies. The novel and the mode of thought that produced it are the outcome of the death of myth and its regeneration in another form. This is the lesson that Lévi-Strauss is inviting us to read into the misadventures of Cimidyuë.

In another ‘serial’ myth, there is a procession of mythical beings: a rolling head, a man with a wooden leg, demons that walk backwards, talking excrements. There are other Amerindian myths in which one finds

⁵ See *Conversations* with Georges Charbonnier, ‘Clocks and Steam-Engines’ (1969b: 32–42; 1961: 37–48).

mythical beings of this kind. But what strikes Lévi-Strauss is that this particular choice of mythical beings does not appear to have a rationale even at the level of structure: 'All of these turn up unexpectedly in the narrative, detached from their relevant mythic paradigms, without which they become impossible to interpret' (1978c: 128; 1968: 104). Furthermore, they all accomplish actions, or are the victims of actions, that seem absurd: a monkey, who is also a man and a jaguar, repeatedly hammers his own nose. Another character, Perisuat, is prevented from sleeping by the nocturnal rantings of a bird perched above his head. If my interpretation of the *Mythologiques* as a mytho-poem is correct, Lévi-Strauss wants us to see these tormented and seemingly lost mythological characters, these victims of the serial degeneration of myth, who endlessly repeat the same absurd series of actions or words, as representatives of the modern condition. These characters have fallen from the mythical world to which they once belonged. Detached from the structures that made up their world, they have lost their meaning and their way. Like Pirandello's stage characters in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, they have become exiled from the imaginary universe that was their own and are wandering about – like us, Lévi-Strauss seems to be suggesting – in a state of limbo.

In these myths, the very nature of the protagonists has changed. They have become anti-heroes. And Lévi-Strauss's proposition is that they have done so because of the serial degradation of narrative structure. The true subject matter of these serial myths is the death of myth as a genre: 'The hero's reduced destiny expresses, in terms of content, the modalities of a form' (1978c: 130; 1968: 106).

Lévi-Strauss concludes this section of *The Origin of Table Manners* with a meditation on the nature of the modern novel. The journey of discovery of Amerindian mythology, the journey to the pole of the far, has brought us back to the pole of the near, the novel form that is one of the distinctive inventions of Western civilisation. It is worth citing here the whole of Lévi-Strauss's commentary, as it constitutes a key to his works as a whole:

Is this not precisely what constitutes the novel? The past, life and the dream carry along with them dislocated images and forms, by which the writer is haunted when chance or some other necessity, contradicting the necessity by which they were once engendered in the actual order of reality, preserves in them, or rediscovers in them, the contours of myth. Yet the novelist drifts at random among these floating fragments that the warmth of history has, as it were, melted off from the ice-pack. He collects these scattered elements and re-uses them as they come along, being at the same time dimly aware that they originate from other structures, and that they will become increasingly rare as he is carried along by a current different from the

one which was holding them together. The *dénouement* or 'fall' of the plot, which from the very beginning was internal to its development, and has recently become external to it – since we are now witnessing the fall or collapse of the plot, after the 'fall' *within* the plot – confirms that because of the novel's historical position in the evolution of literary genres, it was inevitable that it should tell a story that ends badly, and that it should now, as a genre, be itself coming to a bad end. In either case, the hero of the novel is the novel itself. It tells its own story, saying not only that it was born from the exhaustion of myth, but also that it is nothing more than an exhausting pursuit of structure, always lagging behind an evolutionary process that it keeps the closest watch on, without being able to rediscover, either within or without, the secret of a forgotten freshness, except perhaps in a few havens of refuge where – contrary to what happens in the novel – mythic creation still remains vigorous, but unconsciously so. (1978c: 130–1; 1968: 106)

One is here at the core of the narrative of loss that underpins the *Mythologiques*, read as a mytho-poem. It confronts two historical states of the human imagination. To the 'freshness' of Amerindian thought, it opposes the chromaticity – in the musicological sense of the term – of the modern Western imagination. This no doubt provides a supplementary reason for Wagner's tutelary presence throughout this work. In the 'Finale', Lévi-Strauss explains that, having written his own tetralogy, it was only natural that it should also end in twilight. Here, it is not the twilight of the gods, but that of humanity. Lévi-Strauss then recalls the description of a sunset written nearly four decades earlier on board the ship that, in 1935, first took him to America. It is the sole remaining fragment of a novel that he had started to write and abandoned. He presents it, here, as a model not only of the kind of phenomena studied by anthropologists but of life itself. The last pages of *Tristes Tropiques*, *The Naked Man* and *Look Listen Read* are all, in effect, rewritings of this description of a sunset. The image of the sunset encodes Lévi-Strauss's quintessentially entropic vision. The deeper significance of Amerindian mythology is that it provides the vantage point from which we are able to view our own position in this ineluctable march towards total annihilation. And what it reveals to Lévi-Strauss is that, for the modern imagination, it is already too late.

Conclusion: between concept and metaphor

The starting point of this book was a question about the interrelation of the anthropological and aesthetic strands of Lévi-Strauss's thought. The intuition that I have tried to verify is that Lévi-Strauss's aesthetic thought is not something added to his anthropology, but an integral part of it. Anthropological and aesthetic questions intertwine, and do so at the most elementary levels of elaboration of his thought. As I have shown, this is the case with his understanding of concrete logic, the nature/culture dichotomy, myth-making and the very concept of 'structure'. I have further tried to show that this way of relating anthropology and aesthetics is a fertile avenue of inquiry. It brings to light the inherent value of interdisciplinarity. In bringing together otherwise unconnected bodies of knowledge, theoretical discourses, as well as cultures and traditions, one creates new totalities that are greater than the sum of their parts.

Throughout this book, I have proceeded by interrelating Lévi-Strauss's many writings, by setting them in broader literary and philosophical contexts and by examining their development, all the time showing that, in the structural imaginary, aesthetics and anthropology are inseparable. From the start, this study of a series of interdisciplinary connections gave rise to another kind of question, that of the nature of the texts written by Lévi-Strauss. The analysis of theory led to something else, what I have called the (mytho)poetic content of Lévi-Strauss's works. In chapter 1, for example, I showed that beyond Lévi-Strauss's theorisation of the emergence of culture, as a separate realm, one may detect, in his use of figurative language, something like the expression of an unconscious fantasy, that of the 'reconciliation' of nature (reality) and culture (the symbolic order). In chapter 8, I showed that one may read the *Mythologiques* allegorically. Mythical transformations hold up a mirror to the Western imagination and reveal the story of its birth from the serial degeneration of myth. The existence of this (mytho)poetic subtext raises questions about how best to read Lévi-Strauss's works. I have tried to show that to understand

them properly requires an assemblage of their different levels of reading, in much the same way that it requires a pluridisciplinary assemblage of the various bodies of knowledge they explore: anthropological, philosophical, aesthetic, mathematical, etc.

By way of a conclusion, I would like to return in more detail to the question of Lévi-Strauss's use of metaphors and figurative language, a central question for anyone trying to understand how structural anthropology articulates theoretical (speculative) discourse and (mytho)poetic discourse.¹ Metaphors are all-pervasive in Lévi-Strauss's works. They are present in his polysemic titles (*La Pensée sauvage*, *La Voie des masques*) and in the body of his texts. *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* rests on an assimilation of women to words, the domain of alliance being construed as an extension of the domain of 'communication'. Here, it is women not words that are 'communicated'. The notion of *bricolage*, central to *The Savage Mind*, is part concept, part metaphor. And in the *Mythologiques*, metaphors abound, as if one of the corollaries of the relative intangibility of Lévi-Strauss's object of study was a veritable proliferation of metaphors. In the 'Overture', Lévi-Strauss compares his method to an 'anaclastic' (1970: 5; 1964a: 13) – in optics, the study of refracted light – and mythology to a constantly changing 'nebula' (1970: 3; 1964a: 11). Later, he will go on to show that the world of mythology is 'round' and that whatever the direction in which one explores it, one is always brought back to one's point of departure.

I would like to focus, here, on one metaphor in particular, which recurs, in various guises, over a period of some twenty years or more. It is the metaphor of a river, carrying in its flow the debris or fragments of a destroyed edifice. It is given a particularly clear expression in the quotation with which I concluded the last chapter, in which Lévi-Strauss evokes the predicament of the modern novelist, drifting among iceberg-like fragments that the heat of history has detached from the solid block of the perennial icecap. This metaphor is so deeply embedded in Lévi-Strauss's thought that it may be treated as a distinctive trait of his mental universe, a finger-print of sorts.²

This metaphor is more than a figure of speech, more than a mere ornamental trope. It is an organising schema operating, according to Ricoeur's distinction (1978: 6), at the level of discourse, as well as that of the word or phrase. To use the vocabulary of classical rhetoric, this

¹ For a study of game metaphors in Lévi-Strauss's works, see Delruelle 1989.

² There is also in Lévi-Strauss's works a theory of metaphorical thinking. The structure of totemic thought is essentially metaphorical (it establishes a four-term homology between two sets of differences). Metaphors are treated as myths in embryonic form. See, for example, *The Raw and the Cooked* (1970: 339–42; 1964a: 345–7).

metaphor plays a part in Lévi-Strauss's writings not only at the level of *elocutio*, the part of rhetoric concerned with the choice and arrangement of words, but as a feature of *dispositio*, the arrangement of the parts of an argument, and above all *inventio*, the invention of subject matter and the logical arguments that give form to it. This explains why Lévi-Strauss's river metaphor – or the structure for which it is a vehicle – may be seen to shape certain of his texts without necessarily being explicitly expressed in them. Let us start, however, with the explicit occurrences of this metaphor, of which there are at least three, in addition to the passage already cited from *The Origin of Table Manners*.

Prior to its use in *The Origin of Table Manners*, the metaphor occurs, six years earlier, in *The Savage Mind*, where it provides the key to how classificatory systems are used to deal with historical change. In this work, culture is presented as a vast classificatory system offering a range of logico-sensible schemas through which the world may be interpreted. These classificatory schemas offer a principle of stability, an invariable structure with which to grasp changing social realities. To continue to exist, they must be flexible, able to adapt to the flow of things, which they do, Lévi-Strauss shows, by expanding or contracting towards their 'analytic' or 'synthetic' poles. By means of this dynamism, classificatory systems may be modified to fit virtually any kind of reality. Classificatory schemas exist half-way between logic and reality, the necessity of a purely theoretical invention and the contingency of history. Constantly pulled in contradictory directions, their value resides in their ability to mediate between these sets of determinants, to find compromise formations. It is here that Lévi-Strauss introduces his river metaphor. The basic concern of any classificatory system is to continue the work of integrating changing experiences into systems of opposition, the process whereby they win the battle, if not the war, with diachrony. As Lévi-Strauss puts it:

The concern with differentiating features . . . pervades the practical as well as the theoretical activities of the people we call primitive. Its formal nature and the 'hold' it has over every kind of content explain how it is that native institutions, *though borne along on the flux of time (dans un flux de temporalité), managed to steer a course (naviguer) between the contingencies of history and the immutability of design and remain, as it were, within the stream ('courant') of intelligibility.* (1966b: 73; 1962b: 94, my italics)

Lévi-Strauss continues to use this metaphor in his characterisation of totemism, which he presents as a special kind of classificatory system, one whose particularity resides in its relative vulnerability with regards to historical change. Totemism is a means of classifying human populations

and, as such, it is inescapably tied to the fate of those populations, i.e. to demographic changes. Although totemic classifications do have ways of adapting to demographic changes (1966b: 67–73; 1962b: 86–94), these changes constantly threaten to destroy the original structure that supported the classificatory system. As Lévi-Strauss puts it (1966b: 232; 1962b: 277), totemic classifications constitute a ‘grammar’ (an ‘edifice’ of sorts) destined to degenerate into a ‘lexicon’ (a collection of fragments). Lévi-Strauss sums up his argument as follows:

[There is] a permanent conflict between the structural nature of the classification and the statistical nature of its demographic basis. *The classification tends to be dismantled like a palace swept away upon the flood, whose parts, through the effect of currents and stagnant waters, obstacles and straits, come to be combined in a manner other than that intended by the architect.* (1966b: 232; 1962b: 278, my italics)

The river metaphor encodes an opposition which is of central importance to Lévi-Strauss’s anthropological theories, that between structure and event, which is also that between structure and chance. The concept of structure is associated with the human production of organised and hence meaningful totalities. The event represents a counter-principle that negates the human endeavour to create such totalities. The ‘edifices’, ‘castles’ or ‘palaces’ evoked in the different versions of the river metaphor are transposed versions of the totalities that are constantly being created and undone over time, as they are carried along by the river.

There is another occurrence of the metaphor in an earlier work, *Tristes Tropiques*, which was published seven years prior to *The Savage Mind*. The river metaphor is used here, by Lévi-Strauss, to grasp his relationship to the act of writing. Here, the river is Lévi-Strauss’s memory, whose destructive effect is a necessary precondition of the act of writing:

[It] seems to me that *the cloudy liquid* is beginning to clear. To what is this due, if not to the passage of time? [By rolling my memories in its flow], forgetfulness has done its work among my recollections, but it has not merely [eroded] them, not merely buried them. It has made of these *fragments* a *construction* in depth that offers firmer ground beneath the feet and a clearer outline for the eye. One order has been substituted for another. Two cliffs mark the distance between my eye and its object; in the middle ground Time, which *eats away* at those cliffs, has begun to heap up the *debris*. *The high ridges begin to fall away, piece by considerable piece*; Time and Place come into opposition, blend oddly with one another, or become reversed, like sediment shaken clear by the trembling [of the earth’s crust]. Sometimes an ancient and infinitesimal detail will come away like a whole headland; and sometimes *a complete layer of my past will vanish without trace*. Unrelated events, rooted in the most disparate of regions and periods, *suddenly* [slide over one

another] and take shape as a . . . castle which owes its architecture not to my private history but to some altogether wiser designer. (1963b: 45; 1955a: 43–4, my italics)³

One recognises, here, the familiar elements of Lévi-Strauss's river metaphor: the rolling of fragments in the river's flow, the evocation of a gradual yet ineluctable process of destruction. Other features are shared more specifically with the ice-cap version of the metaphor contained in *The Origin of Table Manners*: the crumbling over time of geological structures, the collapsing of vast 'walls' (implicit in the melting of the ice-cap) that 'slide' over one another. The idea of an invisible 'architect' presiding over a transformational process that lies outside of human control is common to the passage, to the passage from *The Origin of Table Manners* and to the passage on totemism. In the *Tristes Tropiques* passage, the metaphor as a whole seems, however, to have been inverted. The fragments rolled about in the river's flow aggregate rather than disaggregate. The river leads *towards* a 'castle' (1963b: 45; 1955a: 44) that lies downstream, whereas in the passage from *The Origin of Table Manners* it leads *away* from a now destroyed 'edifice' that once existed upstream. In *The Origin of Table Manners* past and present have been disjoined, hence the novelist's struggle to discover a lost order in the fragments he/she pieces together. Here, a form of *circulation* between past and present becomes possible: 'Henceforth I can pass from one of these worlds to the other. Between life and myself, Time has laid its isthmus; and it is a longer one than I had expected. Twenty years' forgetfulness has enabled me to elucidate an old experience: one that I had pursued to the ends of the earth without managing either to decipher its meaning or to remain on intimate terms with it' (1963b: 46; 1955a: 44).

The final *explicit* occurrence of the river metaphor, as far as I am aware, is in a revealing autobiographical essay entitled 'New York in 1941' ('New York post- et préfiguratif'), written for the catalogue of the exhibition *Paris–New York* held at the Centre Pompidou in 1977 (it was republished in *The View from Afar*, 1987b: 258–67; 1983: 345–56). It is an evocation of New York in 1941, as seen through the eyes of the young Lévi-Strauss, then a Jewish refugee fleeing Nazi-occupied France. Here, it is New York itself that has become the river.

Lévi-Strauss presents the New York of the early forties as a Golden Age of sorts, no doubt in part because of the refuge it afforded. But what struck this *émigré flâneur*, was a unique intermixing of styles and atmospheres

³ I have amended the translation to preserve as much as possible the metaphors contained in the original, which are crucial for my argument.

(the proverbial melting pot) that transformed New York first into a vast treasure trove – the macrocosmic version of the Third Avenue antiques shop ('Ali Baba's cave', 1987b: 261; 1983: 348) frequented by Lévi-Strauss, Max Ernst, André Breton and Georges Duthuit – and second into a kind of time-machine (1987b: 262; 1983: 350). The river metaphor is used, here, to evoke the dramatic pace of social change which, during the war years in particular, brought to the 'surface' of the city an array of objects so eclectic that it constituted a kind of sum of all human artistic production.

social strata were violently disrupted, sliding over one another and creating huge holes which engulfed styles and bodies of knowledge. Let a generation leave the stage, let a style become passé and another not yet fashionable – and a piece of human history collapsed, its débris falling into the rubbish. This phenomenon was all the more brutal and poignant because, in the swift evolution of society, successive waves of immigrants had been invading New York for a century; according to its social level, each new group came bearing rich or meagre treasures, which necessity forced it to disperse very quickly ... the whole of humanity's artistic legacy [was] present in New York [in the form of fragments: rolled backwards and forwards, like wreckage in the current,] to the capricious rhythm of social ups and downs. (1987b: 262; 1983: 350)⁴

Each fragment provided access to other worlds. Each one constituted a potential 'door' (262/350) through which Lévi-Strauss would be able to slide, like Alice down her rabbit hole (the comparison is Lévi-Strauss's). Here, as in other uses of the metaphor, Lévi-Strauss is concerned with the relation between past and present. Lodged somewhere between the recollection of a pre-industrial order – celebrated, for example, in the style known as *Early American* – and the anticipation of a new kind of modernity, that of the world of mass production, New York provided Lévi-Strauss with the means of a series of 'exchanges' (262/350) between past and present. Each fragment, in a sense, led to another. The maisonettes of Greenwich Village reminded him of the early nineteenth-century Paris of Balzac's *Cousin Pons*, while lewd billboards anticipated advertising strategies that would only become part of French life many years later. His journey to New York was thus also a journey in time, the means of a conversion of a diachronic series into a synchronic whole. As Lévi-Strauss puts it in *Tristes Tropiques*: 'What the traveller collects in his quest for the exotic are anticipated or delayed states of a familiar development. The traveller becomes an antiquarian' (1955a: 94, my translation).⁵ The New York of

⁴ I have amended the translation.

⁵ For the published translation, which does not capture Lévi-Strauss's sense, see 1963b: 91.

the 1940s enabled Lévi-Strauss to experience a *temps perdu*, indeed many different *temps perdus*.

The river metaphor is more than a mere artifice of exposition; it fulfils a more fundamental role in Lévi-Strauss's writing and thinking. It may be seen as a sensible expression of a basic Lévi-Straussian model which shapes many of his insights and arguments. It functions in a manner analogous to other models in the social sciences, as a means of bringing to light certain patterns in otherwise inchoate data, of generating a particular world view (of framing the world) and of testing its validity against reality. It is inherently connected to the work of trying to visualise and hence understand complex phenomena, and here, in particular, the unfolding of events in time. It is dynamic in as much as it participates in what Baudelaire describes as 'the continual multiplication and generation of all the imaginary curves and figures produced in space by [an] object's real elements' (Baudelaire 1986: 169).

The river is a vector, indicating the direction in which a force is applied. This vector draws a line between a point of origin and a terminal point, typically out of reach. The force it designates is applied to elements – debris, fragments – which it rolls along, exposing them to chance, i.e. time. The result is a transformation of the elements that is now destructive, now productive. The magnitude of the force is variable. It may be speeded up, engendering an irreversible disaggregation of fragments, or slowed down, even halted, as is the case with the classificatory systems discussed above, or with the act of interpretation, which Lévi-Strauss construes as an attempt to travel upstream, against the current, towards the principle of coherence afforded by the point of origin: Lévi-Strauss's 'castle'.

The river metaphor is part of a deeper and more widespread configuration in Lévi-Strauss's works. It is connected, first of all, to another recurring metaphor, that of *bricolage*. The *bricoleur* is an assembler of fragments. One might say that he/she is a dweller of the river's banks. One of the distinctive features of the objects created by the *bricoleur* is that, like the icebergs detached from the perennial ice-cap, they are made out of materials that come from elsewhere: they are the products of a process of destruction and still bear the mark of the whole of which they were once a part. As Lévi-Strauss explains: 'the characteristic feature of mythical thought, as of "bricolage" on the practical plane, is that it builds up structured sets, not directly with other structured sets but by using the remains and debris of events . . . odds and ends . . . fossilized evidence of the history of an individual or a society' (1966b: 21–2; 1962b: 36). Chapter 13 of the *Conversations* with Didier Eribon is entitled 'The Raggpickers of

History'. The *bricoleur's* point of view is retrospective. Like the novelist characterised in the ice-cap metaphor, he works with materials which have already been used or modified and which point towards an order that is now beyond reach or cannot be directly experienced.

In *The Savage Mind* Lévi-Strauss characterises 'wild' modes of thinking as follows:

The knowledge which ['wild' thinking] draws [from the world] is like that afforded of a room by mirrors fixed on opposite walls, which reflect each other (as well as objects in the intervening space) although without being strictly parallel. A multitude of images forms simultaneously, none exactly like any other, so that no single one furnishes more than a partial knowledge of the decoration and furniture but the group is characterized by invariant properties expressing a truth. (1966b: 263; 1962b: 313)

This is a spatial variant of the ice-cap metaphor. The relationship of the reflected fragments to the room is the same as that of the floating icebergs to the perennial ice-cap, or of the rubble to the destroyed castle. And indeed, this is also the relationship of the *bricoleur's* 'odds and ends' to the objects of which they were once a part. The essence of the structural method is to seek out relations that remain invariable in successive states of a changing system.

The river metaphor provides a template for Lévi-Strauss's more general conception of the nature of anthropological inquiry: a quest for a series of unattainable 'total' objects that today can only be experienced in fragmented form: humanity degree zero, the 'true' (i.e. 'uncontaminated') 'savage', exoticism itself, the New World as it was experienced by the first European travellers. Lévi-Strauss depicts the anthropologist in the opening pages of *Tristes Tropiques* as follows: 'that is how I see myself: traveller, archaeologist of space, trying in vain to repiece together the idea of the exotic with the help of a *particle* here and a *fragment of debris* there' (1963b: 44; 1955a: 42, my italics). The field experiences described in *Tristes Tropiques* are presented not according to the order in which they occurred, but in terms of a 'journey' from the least to the most 'primitive', starting with the Tibagy reserve Indians – '[they] were neither "true Indians" nor, for that matter, "true savages"' (1963b: 134–5; 1955a: 177) – and moving on to the Caduveo, Bororo and Nambikwara. This narrative structure is reminiscent of Kurt's journey up the Niger in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, perhaps a source for Lévi-Strauss's own river metaphor (Lévi-Strauss has acknowledged the distant influence of Conrad's novel)? The quest upstream is presented from the outset as illusory and vain. It does not lead to the discovery of any man Friday but rather to the

realisation of the severity of the cataclysm unleashed on the New World by the Spanish conquest, which reduced its indigenous populations to rubble. The members of these societies are presented as survivors. The seemingly 'elementary' mode of existence of the populations that he studied is a function not of their proximity to nature, but of the state of destruction in which Lévi-Strauss found them. The art forms that most appeal to Lévi-Strauss – Northwest Coast masks, Caduveo body painting, Amerindian myths – are all art forms that have, as it were, already lost the battle with time. In 'The Lost World' (chapter XXI of *Tristes Tropiques*), Lévi-Strauss speculates that there may once have existed a relatively unified civilisation that spanned the whole of the western coast of America, from North to South.⁶ His hypothesis is that its origins are as old as the Neolithic (much older than was commonly thought to be the case at the time that Lévi-Strauss was writing). According to this version of pre-Columbian history it was as early as the first millennium BC that this pan-American civilisation started to disaggregate, giving rise on the one hand to the ancient civilisations of Mexico and Peru (Maya, Aztec and Inca), which progressed 'with giant's strides' (1963b: 246; 1955a: 299), and on the other to a myriad smaller and more static populations in whom Lévi-Strauss sees the ancient ancestors of the Brazilian populations among which he carried out his field work. The civilisations from which contemporary Amerindian populations are commonly thought to derive are presented as themselves the product of a vast work of destruction. What was assumed to be a point of departure (upstream) is in fact a point of arrival (downstream). And it is this lost civilisation that Lévi-Strauss glimpses in the disaggregated structures of Bororo, Caduveo and Nambikwara society (we are reminded of the novelist floating among 'dislocated images and forms' (1978c: 130; 1968: 106) detached from the perennial ice-cap). The deeper significance of his analysis of the form of 'split representation' practised by the Caduveo lies in its connections with other forms of art, distant in space and time, among them the multilayered masks of the Pacific Northwest Coast. From one side of the continent to the other, he pieces together 'dislocated forms', demonstrating their hidden unity. In a memorable descriptive passage written at the time of Lévi-Strauss's field experience, and later quoted in *Tristes Tropiques*, he evokes the Nambikwara, naked and hungry, shivering in the vicinity of flickering forest fires. Yet, in the warm glow of the fires, they lie huddled together,

⁶ The hypothesis is formulated in *Tristes Tropiques* (chapter XXIV) and reiterated in *Saudades do Brasil*.

laughing and whispering, clutching one another: 'longing for a lost oneness' (1963b: 285; 1955a: 345–6).

The developments that precede raise the question of whether the metaphorical – (mytho)poetic – level of discourse in Lévi-Strauss's works is secondary in relation to the conceptual level of discourse, which it would illustrate, or whether the metaphors come first. French hermeneutics points towards the latter. Ricoeur (1978: 5–6) proposes to see metaphors not as semantically neutral figures of substitution, but in terms of the productive *tension* between similarity and difference generated by the seemingly incongruous association of terms, a tension that is innovative. Construed in this sense, 'metaphor is the rhetorical process by which discourse unleashes the power that certain fictions have to redescribe reality' (Ricoeur 1978: 7). Lévi-Strauss's river metaphor is the means of such a 'redescription' of reality, indeed several 'redescriptions'. At the heart of the river metaphor lies the image of a set of interconnected fragments, one of the keys to Lévi-Strauss's particular way of figuratively 'redescribing' reality. If structural anthropology is a form of semiology, its specificity resides in the fact that the signs with which it deals are all fragmentary. The shard is the minimal unit of signification.

In *The Jealous Potter* Lévi-Strauss examines a dream narrated by Freud. His interpretation of this dream contains a lesson about the complicated relations that may exist between concept and metaphor in a theoretical discourse. The writer Silberer thinks that he must improve a 'rough' passage. In his dream, he visualises himself planing down a piece of wood. The dream is presented by Freud as the conversion of an abstract thought into a visual image, one of the four basic mechanisms of dream-work. Metaphors are also sometimes thought of in terms of the substitution of a concrete image in place of an abstract idea, a process that goes hand in hand with the modification in the status of the comparing term, whose meaning is no longer taken in a literal sense but a figurative one. Lévi-Strauss, however, takes issue with Freud's analysis of this instance of dream-work, arguing that it does not illustrate 'the passage from the abstract to the concrete' but the way in which 'an expression that in waking life is used in a figurative way is metaphorically transposed by the discourse of the dream into its literal meaning' (1988b: 194; 1985: 254). Lévi-Strauss's point is that 'rough', applied to a text, is already a metaphor. What the dream-work does, according to Lévi-Strauss, is use a metaphorical association to give a literal meaning to what, during the day, was expressed figuratively. The metaphorically 'rough' text becomes literally 'rough' by means of a metaphorical equation between the work of the writer and

that of the carpenter. Lévi-Strauss extrapolates from dreams to metaphors. The lesson here is that the figurative meaning of a word is not necessarily secondary, but can also be at the origin. Instead of *deriving* the figurative from the literal, the image from the idea, Lévi-Strauss inscribes the idea in a loop between two metaphors. As Lévi-Strauss points out, the work of the writer could just as well have stood for that of the carpenter. The displacements of meaning, brought about by the use of metaphors, are multidirectional. As Lévi-Strauss explains:

Meaning is transferred not from term to term but from code to code – that is, from a category or class of terms to another category or class. It would be especially wrong to assume that one of these classes or categories naturally pertains to literal meaning, the other to figurative meaning; for these functions are interchangeable and relative to each other. As in the sex life of snails, the function of each class, literal or figurative, starts out as undetermined; then, according to the role that it will be called upon to play in a global structure of signification, it induces the opposite function in the other class. (1988b: 193–4; 1985: 254–5)

There is a further sense in which dream-theory may help shed light on Lévi-Strauss's writings. Freud notes that the manifest dream-content is laconic, while the dream-thoughts to which it leads are numerous and elaborate. The same may be said about Lévi-Strauss's river metaphor, which is a condensed image whose elements lead to an array of different ideas and associations. Like dream-images, Lévi-Strauss's river metaphor is overdetermined. Its constitutive elements lie at the crossroads of many different paths of 'associations', crossroads that, in dreams, Freud calls 'nodal points' (1991: 388). Freud explains the formation of dream-images (the manifest content of the dream) in terms of an electoral metaphor:

The dream is not constructed by each individual dream-thought ... finding (in abbreviated form) separate representation in the content of the dream – in the kind of way in which an electorate chooses parliamentary representatives [under proportional representation]; a dream is constructed, rather, by the whole mass of dream-thoughts being submitted to a sort of manipulative process in which those elements which have the most numerous and strongest support acquire the right of entry into the dream-content – in a manner analogous to election by *scrutin de liste*. (1991: 389)

A similar mechanism may be invoked to explain the formation of the recurring metaphors that give to Lévi-Strauss's works so much of their distinctive character. In other words, the level of theoretical discourse stands in a formally analogous relationship to the metaphors it contains as the latent dream-thoughts stand in relation to the dream-content. Although, in this case, one level does not chronologically or logically precede and give rise to

the other. It is impossible to say whether the theories (equivalent to the dream-thoughts) give rise to the images by a process analogous to condensation or the images to the theories by a semantic scattering (dissemination).

There is another important (mytho)poetic 'nodal point' in Lévi-Strauss's works that I have not yet considered despite the important series of further connections that it allows one to make, namely: heat. Viewing Lévi-Strauss's works in terms of their underlying (mytho)poetic coherence, it is not anodyne that it is heat that is responsible for the destruction of the ice-cap, in the passage contained in *The Origin of Table Manners*. For Lévi-Strauss, heat is intimately related to a historical conception of time, a form of temporality that one may oppose to a mythical conception of time (see chapter 8). This association of historical time to heat is a constant in Lévi-Strauss's thought. It is visible, in particular, in another one of his well-known metaphors, that of 'hot' societies, whose 'thermodynamic' functioning he opposes to the frictionless, clockwork efficiency of 'cold' societies (1969b: 32–4; 1961: 37–9). But heat already makes an appearance, much earlier, in the conclusion to the *Elementary Structures of Kinship*. There, it is equated with the emergence of 'symbolic thought', in other words with the prohibition of incest, the institution of exchange and the passage from a state of nature to a state of culture (I will cite the passage in a moment). Lévi-Strauss's early kinship theory anticipates mythical thought, which associates fire, and in particular cooking fire (the means of converting the raw into the cooked), with the passage from nature to culture. As I have mentioned above, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* formulates what is essentially a theory of the 'communication' of women. More precisely, it founds social order in the structures whereby women are exchanged. In the conclusion to the *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Lévi-Strauss imagines other possible worlds, in which regulated exchange does not exist. Here, Lévi-Strauss metaphorically associates various kinds of 'unregulated' exchange with pathological forms of communication ('abus du langage'). In doing so, he introduces for the first time a theme that, as we have already seen in chapter 7, will be fundamental to his analysis of mythology, and in particular his hypothesis of the existence of two universal mythical types: Oedipal – representing the *burnt* world of excessive communication – and Parsifalian – representing the frozen world of interrupted communication.⁷ It is worth citing, here, the whole of the final paragraph of the *Elementary Structures*:

⁷ It is worth noting in this context that the therapeutic power of the Cuna shaman, whose ritual cure I discussed in the introduction to this book, also consists in solving a problem in communication. He

But that [burning] atmosphere, [full of pathos], [in which] symbolic thought . . . and social life, which is its collective form, [were born], can still . . . kindle our dreams [with the mirage it offers]. To this very day, mankind has always dreamed of seizing and fixing that fleeting moment when it was permissible to believe that the law of exchange could be evaded, that one could gain without losing, enjoy without sharing. At either end of the earth and at both extremes of time, the Sumerian myth of the golden age and the Andaman myth of the future life correspond, the former placing the end of primitive happiness at a time when the confusion of languages made words into common property, the latter describing the bliss of the hereafter as a heaven where women will no longer be exchanged, i.e., removing to an equally unattainable past or future the joys, eternally denied to social man, of a world in which one might [live *amongst ourselves*]. (1969a: 496–7; 1967a: 569–70)⁸

Heat is the element that connects the version of the river metaphor contained in *The Origin of Table Manners* and the anthropological theories of *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Here, it would seem, the ‘primitive’ unity of the ‘castle’ may be equated with the fantasy of a world blissfully ignorant of the injunction of the incest taboo, a world in which women were not exchanged, and life unfolded ‘amongst ourselves’ (1969a: 497; 1967a: 570). The fragmentation of the castle and the dispersal of its elements by the warm tide of history would correspond, in this context, to the dispersal of women consequent to the institution of matrimonial exchange. Here, the Lévi-Straussian mytho-poem may be viewed as an attempt to imagine life prior to the introduction of the Law of the Father, as a quest for the mother.

As this examination of a recurring metaphor suggests, Lévi-Strauss’s writings point towards a unity that transcends them. Said differently, they constitute a coherent oeuvre. A compelling underlying necessity underpins the many different essays and book-length studies that Lévi-Strauss has written, even if this necessity and its source can only ever be glimpsed. The interpretations that precede constitute, themselves, a kind of quest upstream or an attempt at a form of *bricolage*, an assemblage of fragments, whose unity I have tried to demonstrate. Perhaps one of the distinctive marks of Lévi-Strauss’s works, and a measure of their enduring value, lies in a curious reversal: that while engaging the interpreter/exegete in a long process of discovery, they also present him/her with an image of his/her own activities.⁹

re-establishes the proper equilibrium between the patient’s deficit of signifieds – her experience is at the pole of interrupted communication – and the shaman’s own excess of signifiers – his experience is at the pole of accelerated communication.

⁸ I have amended the translation.

⁹ I am grateful to Vincent Debaene who first made this point (personal communication).

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